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AGE OF THUNDER

By the same Author

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AGE OF THUNDER

by

Frederic Prokosch

The will shall be harder, the courage shall be keener,
Spirit shall grow great, as our strength falls away.

The Battle of Maldon

1945

CHATTO & WINDUS
LONDON

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In memory of

ANTOINE DE ST. EXUPÉRY

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THE FIRST NIGHT

Chapter One

It was late in May and the night had just fallen. The curtains had been drawn and there was only a faint and dismal light in the room; a small old-fashioned oil lamp with a green glass shade had been placed on the bar. It was a tidy country inn, of the type one sees scattered among the slopes and along the lakes of the Haute-Savoie; bleak and compact, built for radiant summers as well as tempestuous winters. The night was warm and the windows were open. The blue curtains swayed gently and the scent of fresh spring shrubbery, of lilac and syringa and the dry sweet scent of pine-woods, slid past the curtains into the room.

There were eight in the room: the innkeeper and his wife and six others. They had been sitting in silence. The innkeeper was a heavy-set man with a square head and truculent eyes sunk curiously deep below the bushy brows; he stood behind the bar and was leaning against the mirror and said nothing. Now and again he turned and glanced at the cuckoo clock above the bar. His wife was a dark, thick woman with broad hips and a face prematurely coarsened by labour, discontent and sensuality; drops of moisture clung to her forehead. She sat at the end of the bar with a newspaper in her hand which she surveyed in a listless, fidgeting manner.

The other six were sitting at two separate tables.

One of these six was a woman: a grey-haired peasant woman dressed stiffly in black with high black shoes and a flat black hat. She broke the silence.

"It is growing late," she said slowly. She spoke in a musing, rather indifferent tone.

"Soon," said the old curate, "it will be too late." He was sitting beside the peasant woman. He resembled her sufficiently to be her brother; their Haute-Savoie accents were identical.

"Too late?" said the peasant woman. "Too late? Listen, Constantin. It will never be too late. Never." Her voice had become a crisp, hard monotone; but a faint tremor had appeared on her face, a hint of tension that looked incongruous in her red and rustic features.

There was silence again. A breath of wind passed through the window, there was an undulation in the dark blue curtains and a flicker under the green glass shade. The men sitting at the tables glanced uneasily toward the door. Several minutes passed.

"Who is this man, exactly?" inquired one of them, a stout man with a pince-nez.

"Which man?" said the innkeeper laboriously.

"This one that is coming. What is his name? Yes. Milliquet." The stout man took off his pince-nez and wiped it slowly. "Who is he exactly? Where does he come from?"

"From Chambéry, I hear," grunted the innkeeper.

"Has he done this trip before?"

"So they say," said the innkeeper with indifference. "He's one of the regular ones, they say. Knows the country like the palm of his hand."

"Do they know him down in Annecy?" demanded the stout man. "Do you know him?"

"Know him?" said the innkeeper. "Who knows anybody nowadays? Do you know me? Do I know you?" He leaned over and spat behind the bar, with an air of disgust.

"Then how are we to recognize him?" The stout man spoke in a crisp, cultivated, irritable voice. "If you've never seen him?"

"He will recognize us," said the innkeeper, his face quite expressionless.

"You're sure he's trustworthy?" said a small, kindly-eyed man. "You're quite sure?"

The innkeeper shrugged his shoulder.

There was another ripple of wind and the green lamp-

light flickered. The eight faces sprang into a masklike brightness and receded.

"Yes, suppose it's a trick?" said the old curate, and glanced at the peasant woman with a quick, sly smile.

No one answered him and again there was a short silence, except for the rustling of the newspaper—it was the *Journal d'Annecy*—as the innkeeper's wife turned the page with a yawn.

The six guests sitting at the two tables were obviously prepared for a journey. All of them had either small bundles or knapsacks beside them; the curate had a small pigskin valise. Two of them—the curate and the peasant woman—clearly came from the immediate neighbourhood. Two others—the little mild-eyed man and his angular friend—had a dishevelled, Bohemian air which suggested the Rive Gauche. The fifth was the stout and fastidious man with the pince-nez; he might have been a lawyer. The sixth was a negro.

"Everything nowadays is a trick," said the angular man, who spoke with a Parisian accent. "One has to be suspicious of everything. Of everyone."

"One has to be patient," said his friend, the gentle-eyed little man. "One has to wait, that's all."

"Wait," declared the angular man with acidity. "It is nothing but wait and wait."

"It was that before the war too," said the innkeeper's fat wife with sudden petulance. "Here in St. Jorioz it was always wait, wait, wait." Her voice rose on a note of self-induced hysteria, then died emptily away.

Again there was a pause. The innkeeper's wife had laid down the paper and the stillness was so complete that one could hear, portentously swollen, the drip-drip of the faucet under the bar and the ticking of the cuckoo clock.

There was an air of suspense in the room, so heavy in the silence that one could hear it. One could hear it in the way someone breathed, in the slow lifting of a foot, in the sudden rustle of the peasant woman's stiff black skirt.

"We wait and wait," continued the angular Parisian, Amedée, in a low voice. "The fate of Europe hangs like a drop of oil on the end of a needle. We wait and keep waiting. When it falls we will know whether we live or die."

"Patience, Amedée," said his friend. "It will come. It will come soon."

"Someone told me yesterday," whispered the curate, that the bombardments over Calais are terrific. A man who just arrived from Lille. Terrific, he told me."

The peasant woman nodded. "It will come any day now. Mark my words. Any day."

"What is wrong?" demanded Amedée with sudden bitterness. "Why is our own side always so slow? Why are the others always shrewder and quicker? Why is it? Is it after all, I keep asking myself, that they are the ones whose heart lies more in the struggle? Are they the keener and more willing to sacrifice? Is it their turn after all? That's what I can't help asking myself."

"Nonsense, Amedée," said his friend. "Stop speaking like that. One would almost think you were a collaborationist."

"Well, Ulysse, how long have we waited now? Two years. Three years. How do we know it won't be twenty years?"

"One must keep hoping," said his little friend Ulysse. "Nowadays one must live on hope and patience."

The stout lawyer in the pince-nez turned to the two Parisians and said in a confidential tone: "Tell me, my friends, how is it in Paris?"

"How is it in Paris?" repeated Amedée, with a slight sneer. "Listen. I shall tell you. The food is still excellent, if you can pay. The women's clothes are still exquisite, if you can pay. The streets are still beautiful. The weather is still delightful. Listen, monsieur, Paris is still charming. It is a charming, elegant, well-equipped, well-ordered prison."

"Why did you leave Paris?" inquired the lawyer softly, without raising his eyes. "Why are you leaving France?"

The two Parisians exchanged a rapid, expressionless glance.

"We have friends in Zürich," said Amedée blandly. "We're going on a visit. That's all. Just visiting friends." He smiled, a taut and angular smile. "And you, monsieur?"

"I," said the lawyer, smiling softly in return, "am going on a financial visit. A little business of money. Nothing serious, you understand. Just an excursion."

"And you, monsieur *le nègre*?" said Amedée, with arid politeness, turning to the negro.

The negro had said nothing at all so far. He was a massive, muscular fellow, quite bare above the waist. "I too have business," he said in a low, intensely calm voice. "I am looking for someone." He spoke a fluent French, but with a pungent, rather melodious West Indies accent.

There was an odd and bitter tension in the air. The little man Ulysse murmured quietly: "It will be sad to leave France."

"Yes," said the stout lawyer, and as he spoke an air of relief passed through the room. "Yes. It will be hard to leave France."

"France," whispered the old curate. "France. . . ."

The word lingered in the air, calm, delicate; no one wished to disturb it. No one said anything. The breeze brought the fragrance of the woods into the room and the sound of the word seemed to blossom, to grow legendary and consoling. The faces grew dreamy and seemed to listen as the word gathered eloquence in the stillness: the darkness seemed to part: and the word no longer signified a land torn by conquest and betrayal. Imperceptibly it brightened and re-created a land of shadowy groves and summery fields, of castles in the

forest with the fallow deer grazing in stillness, and the distant echo of the hunter's horn. . . .

Suddenly the cuckoo clock struck. It was ten o'clock.

"Ah well," said the lawyer with the pince-nez. "It is late. Is it worth while waiting any longer?"

"You needn't wait," said the peasant woman sharply.

"Please, Albertine," said the curate.

The innkeeper's wife yawned.

"I'll wait another ten minutes," said the lawyer.

"Might as well," muttered the innkeeper.

There was silence again. And then through the silence, like the boring of an insect, a distant sound grew audible. There was a sudden tightening in all the faces as they listened: it was the sound of a motor.

The sound grew brittle and abrupt; and came to a halt beside the inn.

Chapter Two

THE wind rustled faintly among the sycamores. He lay still and held his breath.

There was no sound at all; only the wind among the trees and the light crisp rattle of the wind in the grasses.

He looked at the sky overhead. Never had the stars looked so bright and multitudinous, so wild, so far, so feverish; the sky was alive with them. They simmered and stabbed. From the left he saw three tenuous white fingers of cloud approaching out of nowhere; he saw them spread and obliterate star after star, and then pass onward and vanish away. Again the sky shone wild and cloudless.

Then as he watched them the stars appeared to grow indolent, to lose their glitter; they fell into place and the sky regained its stillness, and he stretched out his hands and lightly touched the damp earth on each side with his fingers.

Now he grew aware of his body. He felt a slight pain above his left ear and a dull ache in his left hip. He moved first one leg and then the other; they moved without pain. He sat up. Then he whispered to himself: "At last. I am here. Here. In France." Scrupulously he repeated: "I am in France." And with the repetition of the word a sense of mystery rose and enveloped him, and the cool damp earth he was touching with his fingertips felt like the soil of a distant planet.

He turned his head. The momentary dizziness was gone. He was sitting on the edge of an open strip of pastureland: and on his right rose a grove of sycamores, brightened by moonlight. On his left he saw the dull gleam of wind-ruffled water through the shrubbery; and beyond, a long pale stripe that might have been a highway; and then, still beyond, a range of hills, and on the edge of the hills a dark cluster of houses.

There was a faint outcry among the shrubs. Two small nightbirds, one pursuing the other, sped straight overhead and vanished among the sycamores.

Then he noticed the parachute lying behind him, shimmering faintly like a great lettuce leaf. He rose and crept to the edge of the meadow, where he was protected by the shadow of the trees.

First he severed the parachute with a knife. He was wearing thick gloves, and when the knife slipped and pierced the glove it pricked his thumb lightly; he felt a drop of blood warm and moist inside the glove.

Then he slipped off the harness and removed the crash helmet and stepped out of the uniform: he slipped on a dark woollen shirt instead. He took off the heavy mud-stained boots and put on a pair of low black shoes which he drew from his knapsack.

He kept reminding himself: Don't forget. Be careful. This must be done flawlessly.

With the tiny spade that he had brought with him he cut the letter H into the turf, about two feet wide and three

feet long. Carefully he folded back the two flaps and dug a cavity about sixteen inches deep, piling the earth into a single heap. He inserted the parachute, the harness, the crash helmet and the boots and uniform, and filled in the crevices with earth so that the surface lay smooth; the remainder of the earth he then scattered under the trees; then he folded the turf back again and stamped on the wounds and creases and scraped over them lightly with a fallen twig. Not a trace now remained. It had taken about thirty minutes.

All he had left now was a small brown knapsack of French make and of commonplace appearance.

He took out his map and struck a match. He tried to place the highway: it must be the road from Ugines to Annecy. The water was the Lac d'Annecy. The mills must be the Semnoz. Perhaps the group of houses was Doussard; or conceivably St. Jorioz.

The match died. The moon was high and bright and the field lay shining. The sycamore leaves were gleaming with an unnatural frozen brightness. And suddenly a sense of mystery returned and overwhelmed him, and it seemed that the world was perceptibly turning and that he was standing at an oblique angle to the earth; everything was sloping. Everything—leaves, field, hillside—had grown swollen and vivid, as though seen through a microscope. And this added to the dreamlike intensity of the silence.

A familiar sound broke the silence. The sense of the oceanic had enveloped him like a cloak; it fell abruptly away. He felt exposed and weirdly solitary.

The rapid flutter of a motor took shape among the hills and grew distinct and localized. It grew closer and moved evenly along the middle distance. Then it ceased.

His heart was beating wildly. The sense of danger sprang before him like an animal. He had never known it quite like this; quite so vivid and uncontrollable. It

shot past him like a black, living thing and then expanded and grew gaseous until the very leaves above him seemed infected with peril.

He leaned against the tree. His mind groped through the panic and vertigo toward the sound of a voice; it reached toward the recollected words which a clear calm voice had spoken in England three days ago and which he had repeated to himself again and again; once more he whispered them:

"Sometimes, Martin, we have errands which may appear strange but which are a natural and crucial part of something larger. Do you understand? When some impediment appears in a highly delicate machine, delay is fatal. The rot must be checked or the machine will collapse. Let me explain. There have been certain disturbing leakages lately. There have been certain mysterious accidents. Two couriers have disappeared without trace; at least three local headquarters and arms deposits have been revealed to the enemy. All in the region lying between Annecy and the frontier near Monthey. Do I make myself clear? . . . We have chosen you for this particular mission for several reasons. First because you know the country. You lived in Geneva as a child and you went to school, I am told, in a small town called St. Pierre de Rumilly. That may be of use. Secondly, you speak the languages—German and Italian as well as French. You speak all three of these competently. Very good. Thirdly, you are both cautious and courageous, above all you are observant. There is also a fourth reason, but I shall leave it unmentioned. You will land in the Haute-Savoie; you have the map. It is difficult terrain; there is a risk involved. You have instructions concerning your behaviour. Make friends with the maquis; but the precise nature of your mission must be kept secret at all costs. Make friends with the local inhabitants; they will hep you, and their help may be precious. You will proceed from Annecy to the Swiss border. There are frequent underground expeditions to Switzerland in precisely this region. With luck you may be able to join one of these. . . . We shall allow you a maximum of four days for your journey. You will keep your eyes and ears open; try

to localize the decay; try to identify the poison. You will make your presence known in Monthey immediately on your arrival in Switzerland. You will present your report to our friend in Monthey and then follow his instructions. . . . There will be moments, perhaps, Martin, when your mission will seem vague, hopeless, and unfulfillable. But remember this: everything you see or hear will be precious; everything you do will be fateful. Remember, your mission is a difficult and solemn one: the pursuit and discovery of a mortal evil. . . . One last thing. On your way, please communicate with a man named Robinson in St. Pierre de Rumilly. He may be of use. That is all. I know I can trust you, Martin. Good luck. And God bless you."

Those were the farewell instructions. After he had repeated them, phrase by phrase and with the familiar intonation, he again felt stable, like a man who has just glanced back at the path he has travelled and can see ahead the path he is to follow.

He crept along the edge of the pasture toward the highway. A pang of uneasiness suddenly struck him; he paused. He took off his gloves and, with a passing sense of guilt, threw them as far as he could among the trees.

He paused at the highway. There was nothing to be seen, no house, no sign of life. He hesitated, like a cat about to spring. He felt the veins in his wrists and throat throbbing violently, as though a wire were slowly tightening around them.

He felt the beating of his blood subside. Slowly, quite casually, he crossed the pale blue area of the highway and entered the trees on the other side. He walked on through the woods, calmly, free of thought, for twenty minutes or so.

Suddenly the trees opened. There was a two-storey building, too large to be a dwelling, at the edge of the road only twenty yards away. He could see a wavering thread of light as the curtains at one window parted momentarily in the breeze. He crept slowly toward the window.

Chapter Three

THERE was a crisp knock on the door of the inn. And then, without further ceremony, the door noiselessly opened.

Two men in the uniform of the Darnand militia stepped in. Both were about thirty-five, trim, sombre, rather desiccated. They looked like brothers.

"Good evening," said the larger one in a flat Alsatian accent.

The innkeeper grumbled. The innkeeper's wife grew tense and cast a covert glance at the guests.

"Any strangers here?" inquired the Alsatian, in a rather defensive tone.

"Not more than usual," grunted the innkeeper. "You are at liberty to look about, of course."

"I mean newcomers. Tonight. During the past hour or so. I think you know what I mean."

"Parachutists?" said the innkeeper.

The Alsatian nodded.

The innkeeper shrugged his shoulders and leaned down to fill two glasses of beer. "Is it likely?"

The Alsatian glanced around the room and slowly approached the bar. His companion remained standing near the door.

"Well," he said, "three of them were seized half an hour ago near Châtelard."

"Yes?" The innkeeper seemed scarcely interested. The two glasses were full and he placed them on the bar and paused and looked at the Alsatian. "Near Châtelard? Well, well."

"Also some supplies. As usual. The usual thing, you understand. Well?"

"Please," said the innkeeper, and invited the two newcomers to drink.

The lawyer with the pince-nez spoke. "Well, my good

men. Suppose they had come here? Suppose they were sitting in this very room? What would you do in that case?"

"We haven't come here for arguments," said the Alsatian in tones of fatigue.

"No? Well, I take it that you would arrest them. Is that correct?"

The Alsatian didn't answer.

"It's no use starting a quarrel, Monsieur Yernaux," said the little man Ulysse.

"After all," said Amedée cuttingly, "they have their duty to perform."

"Well, we're all Frenchmen," said the innkeeper.

It was evident that everyone in the room felt a certain weary, stereotyped contempt for the militiamen.

"The other night," said the negro, "a group of parachutists landed near Aix-les-Bains."

"That will do, Quivar," snapped the peasant woman. "You needn't continue."

"No one," continued the negro blandly, "bothered about them. Not even the militia."

"Quivar," warned the peasant woman.

"Not even the Germans," said Quivar.

The Alsatian shrugged his shoulders and drained his glass of beer.

"Well, no one's been here, then?" he muttered indifferently, and started back toward the door.

No one answered.

He turned and glanced sourly at the clock over the bar, nodded curtly to the innkeeper, surveyed the guests for a last time without interest and went out, followed by his silent and oddly similar companion.

For a while no one spoke. Then Amedée said dryly: "The old story."

"I myself," said the innkeeper's wife, "can't help feeling sorry for them."

"Why sorry?" snapped the peasant woman, sitting up

very stiff and symmetrical, her hands folded across the leather handbag in her lap.

"Well, what can they do?"

"They can go to hell," retorted the old woman. "That's what they can do. They make themselves ridiculous"—she stressed each epithet—"and cumbersome and hated."

She glanced trenchantly at the negro. "And you, Quivar, if you please, hold your tongue."

"It's no harm," muttered Quivar.

"No harm and no good," snarled the peasant woman, on the verge of a fit of temper, and sitting even more stiffly and symmetrically than before.

The negro didn't reply; he proceeded to scratch his huge right shoulder with a sheepish air. It was possible to smell the earthy, leathery, rather comforting scent of his bare torso. An air of boundless confidence emanated from the man; too instinctive to be courage, too spontaneous to be cunning.

At this moment the door opened quietly and a thin man in a black suit and a black hat entered without knocking.

Everyone looked at him without the slightest change of expression. There was a subtle but instantaneous tightening in the atmosphere.

The newcomer nodded with a cursory politeness and walked up to the innkeeper. He glanced swiftly at the six guests, appraising each in the flash of an eye, and observed quite casually to the innkeeper: "My name is Milliquet. I believe you have a parcel for me?"

The innkeeper nodded, and there was a shifting of feet in the room and a rustling and a relaxation.

"You are late, Monsieur Milliquet," declared the lawyer, Yernaux.

Milliquet ignored this observation and inquired: "Have all these people been waiting for me?"

The innkeeper nodded.

"There were to be seven," stated Milliquet.

"My sister Térèse," put in the peasant woman rapidly, "is ill. She is staying on a little longer. She'll be coming later. Some other time."

Suddenly Milliquet caught sight of the negro Quivar. A curious expression passed over his face: a look of intense astonishment that was almost panic. Instantly he regained his poise. "Who is the negro?" he inquired casually.

"He is coming with us," said the old curate with deliberation.

He comes from the Antilles," said the peasant woman. "He's worked for me for seven months. He's a good man. He knows the country. He'll be of use to you." She was speaking in a very calm and matter-of-fact tone.

Quivar nodded. "I know the country," he said in his soft melodious voice.

Milliquet looked at him a moment longer with narrowing eyes. Then he leaned against the bar and placed his elbows behind him on the bar and said, in a slow and explicit manner:

"The wagon is waiting outside. We cross the lake and then we go by foot. We will be travelling at night exclusively. By day it is next to impossible, of course, to elude the sentries. Especially at the highways and the bridges."

"What is the route?" said Yernaux.

"Excuse me, monsieur. Allow me to continue. There are three ways. The safest way is down to Ugines and then along the shore of the Arly to Mégève and St. Gervais-les-Bains. This takes a good four days, but, as I say, it is safe, almost totally safe. It means crossing north of the Aiguille d'Argentière and then finishing up at Orsières in Switzerland. The second way is past St. Pierre de Rumilly and Bonneville and the Roc d'Enfer and crossing toward Monthey either at the Pas de Margin or near the Col de Coux. That way goes through forests

most of the time and there is no path and it is impossible without an experienced guide." He glanced with severity at his listeners and panted a little; he seemed to be suffering from asthma.

"What is the third way?" said the negro.

Milliquet shot a hostile look at him. "The third way is the shortest and easiest and takes only a day and two nights. It is unquestionably a risk. It goes parallel to the road past Annecy-le-Vieux and Groisy and then cuts over to Annemasse and joins the road two kilometres from the border. On a moonless night it is worth trying. It ends you quite comfortably near Geneva."

"It is of no advantage to you," said the peasant woman tartly, "to end near Geneva, if I may say so."

"You intend to come along?" inquired Milliquet with sarcasm.

"Only till Talloires," said the peasant woman quickly. "Only across the lake. The two of us." She glanced sharply at the curate.

Milliquet shrugged his thin black shoulders. "Well," he demanded, "which way shall we take?"

"I favour the second way," said Yernaux.

"It is between the second and the third," observed the curate.

"The second is the one," said the negro very gently and with finality.

At this moment, without any warning, the door opened a third time.

A young man entered.

He was dressed in a thick dark blue woollen shirt and trousers of black worsted. It was a costume not unusual for the place, and yet it had, on him, an unnatural air; it looked somehow outlandish. He was healthy, broad-shouldered and thick-chested, somewhat shorter than average, with curly black hair and gentle brown eyes of remarkable brightness and serenity. His teeth sparkled and his lips were full; above the open shirt one could see

the dark hairs curling toward his throat. There was something faintly Italian in his dark good looks and something French in his alertness, but there was also a quality in him which was neither French nor Italian; a simplicity and calm, perhaps a certain shyness.

"Good evening," he said, and paused inside the door.

No one replied.

"I hope," he began. Then he hesitated and said: "May I join you?"

The innkeeper raised his eyebrows and glanced at Milliquet.

"It's late," said the innkeeper's wife, in her heavy, petulant way.

"Are you looking for someone?" said the innkeeper.

"Yes," said the young man and glanced with a smile around the room. "But I won't find him here, I suppose."

"You're a stranger here?"

The young man nodded.

"Where do you come from?"

The young man glanced at the others one by one; he evaded the question. "I've come quite a long way," he said, and placed his knapsack on the floor near the doorway.

Milliquet had been looking intently at the young man. Now he said, in a surprisingly soft, even ingratiating tone: "And where are you going?"

"I am going where you are going," said the young man simply; his French was quite faultless.

Milliquet glanced with curiosity at his shoes. Then he raised his eyes again; his glance rested briefly on the drop of blood which had hardened on the young man's thumb; then he gazed into the newcomer's face with a mingling of friendliness and cunning. "What is your name?"

"Jean-Nicolas Martin," said the young man quietly.

"And you know where we happen to be going, it appears, Monsieur Martin?"

"I was listening at the window," said the young man, with a disarming smile.

"And you too are going to Switzerland?"

"I am," said the young man gravely.

"Rather an extraordinary coincidence, isn't it?" said Milliquet, almost in a whisper.

"I was told," said the young man, gazing deeply at Milliquet and weighing every word, "that there are regular expeditions from Annecy. And I would rather go with you, if I may, than go alone."

"I see," said Milliquet. "I see." He glanced at the others. They were all, each in his way, observing the newcomer; and each in his own way with a certain friendliness, for something in the young man's face was instantly appealing: a boyish tenderness of feature, a warm innocence of eye.

"You've just arrived, I see," said Yernaux the lawyer pointedly.

Jean-Nicolas hesitated, then nodded.

"Very well," said Milliquet. "There is room for one more." He sighed. "Well, to continue. It is decided that we go the second way. Over Bonneville. Very well."

"How long will it take?" said Yernaux.

"Three nights. Two days of sleeping in the woods. Or in a barn if we are lucky."

"You've done this way before?" said the negro softly, in a purring tone.

Milliquet looked at him with controlled anger. He breathed asthmatically. "I've done this way before," he replied tensely.

The others had begun to pick up their sacks and satchels; the innkeeper's wife sauntered to the door and opened it. Outside they could hear the horses' hoofs restless on the gravel; they could see the dim light shining faintly on the horses' manes and the harness.

Chapter Four

THE road curved to the right and followed a small winding stream. The ruts were deep and muddy. Little pools lay shining in the road, reflecting the stars and the moonlit foliage; and as the wagon rolled through these little pools the horses' hoofs sucked laboriously and the wheels hissed gently.

"Does this stream flow into Lac d'Annecy?" said someone in the wagon.

"It does," stated Milliquet crisply. Then he added: "But we won't be following the stream all the way to the lake."

They sat in silence. The road kept winding and sinking, growing worse as they went along. The night was growing deeper and more odorous and still.

Soon the breeze ceased altogether. The leaves hung still as glass and they could hear, through the hissing of the wheels and the sucking of the hoofs, the insane little whine of the insects. Each time that the horses came to a brief halt a cloud of mosquitoes encircled them, clung to their skin: the night was growing steadily more oppressive.

"There will be a storm," said the little painter Ulysse, gazing at the sky. "I've never known it to be so hot and still in May. A storm will be coming surely. Tonight or tomorrow."

He placed his forefinger in his mouth and then held it in the air, for no particular reason; he was looking anxious and puzzled.

Ulysse was a rather childlike man, with a circular face and vague grey eyes which lingered thoughtfully over two abnormally red cheeks. His curly grey hair had been cut —by some female relative perhaps, or his cook—so that bangs like a bullock's hung over his forehead: unruly wisps of grey hair protruded over his ears and above the nape of his neck. He had a tiny, upward-pointed nose,

which gave his face a hopeful and infantile look. His lips were full and firm, slightly parted whenever he listened, and for ever ready to break into a smile which was humble, helpless, faintly alarmed. He wore a green pullover with a polo neck. His clothes were worn and shabby, as were Amedée's. Both of them had something of the dreamy, disputatious flavour of Montparnasse.

The land grew level and they passed a canal. A long row of poplars, sleek and inverted, shone darkly in the ribbon of green glazed water.

"It's a troubled kind of night," whispered Ulysse. "Motionless. Unreal. Like a dream."

"All of life nowadays," said Amedée, "has that torpor, that unreality. Life has become a dream."

"It is the war, Amedée, which is the dream. Some day we shall wake up. The dream will crumble and even the memory of the dream will crumble. . . . Happiness will return."

"No," said Amedée with pessimism: "it is you who are the dreamer, Ulysse. This war will last the rest of our lives. Even when the killing has stopped and the ruins have been rebuilt, the war will live on; no one can rebuild the ruined nerves."

Then, at some almost imperceptible signal, they all grew tense; a familiar stab, half electrical and half resigned, ran through Jean-Nicolas. He had known that lightning rapidity in the senses before. It meant one thing: the enemy.

The wagon had been rumbling slowly along. The horses were moving at a slow and apathetic pace, but the wagon went bumping along behind them in nervous jolts. Now and then a twig would crackle under the wheels and snap the silence. Or a single stray pebble, sent scuttering by a horse's hoof, would animate the silence and suspension of the night. They could see the main highway running pale between two rows of trees; and beyond, not far beyond, the lake lay glimmering.

"Halt!" A figure stepped out of the shadows. They could see the outline of the German helmet and the needle of moonlight darting along the bayonet.

The wagon came to a halt. The thin man, Milliquet, leaned out and beckoned to the German.

The German hesitated; then he stepped closer, reluctantly.

Jean-Nicolas looked instinctively for the other one; he could see the glimmer of a second helmet and a second bayonet among the shadows: the Germans never went alone at night.

Milliquet held out a small card. "A permit," he said in a bad, nasal German, pronouncing each syllable with care, "from Colonel Eigruber."

The soldier stared at the wagon, expressionless and undecided.

Milliquet repeated, in precisely the same tones: "A permit, if you please, from Colonel Eigruber."

The German looked back at his companion who stood hidden among the shadows; he looked at him with a mild and vaguely harassed expression, as though he were awaiting instructions which he knew would not be forthcoming. He was a little man of about forty-five, with a thin blond moustache and a deeply cleft chin.

Jean-Nicolas felt a stirring at his side; it was the negro, Quivar. His eyes had suddenly grown intense; they pierced the darkness, but whether with hate or terror Jean-Nicolas could hardly say.

Milliquet motioned to the driver. "Go on," he said with equanimity. "Kindly give my regards to Lieutenant Kreutzheim when you see him," he said to the German in the same meticulous, nasal accent, and they drove off again. "From Duchamps, please. Duchamps."

They crossed the highway, which was quite deserted. The road continued at an oblique angle on the other side, passing through an area of shrubs and willows and winding muddily toward the lake.

Jean-Nicolas felt drops of sweat gathering in the hollows of his eyes. Out of this hot silence, like a tiny tom-tom of warning, the cicadas began to sound.

Jean-Nicolas turned his head. Cautiously his glance wandered from one silhouette to another. He couldn't help wondering: had something gone wrong? The men in the wagon seemed curiously listless, subdued by some indefinable, feverish quality in the air. Milliquet sat with his narrow shoulders hunched, breathing asthmatically, staring straight ahead.

Now they could see the lake again and smell the reeds and the rushes. There was a foretaste of summer in the arid chant of the cicadas.

The wagon came to a halt. "Wait here," said Milliquet, and climbed down. "I'll be back," he whispered as an afterthought. He vanished among the shrubs that concealed the shore.

They waited. The gnats now gathered in droves.

"Please," sighed Amedée, turning to the negro. "A cigarette?"

The negro reached obediently into his trouser pocket. "If you please, monsieur." He drew forth a cigarette from the green pack and passed it to Amedée.

Amedée's face grew bright in the matchlight: it shone tense and angular. Amedée was a tall, didactic man with eyes continually half closed in a kind of indolent scrutiny. Everything about him sloped downward—his eyes, his shoulders, the creases on his narrow face, the creases in his clothes: only a few rusty hairs on his head rose stubbornly upward. Both he and Ulysse were types that Jean-Nicolas had frequently observed in the cafés of Montparnasse. Ulysse was the ardent but talentless painter; Amedée the militant disciple of Mallarmé. A sense of failure pervaded his whole being; so much so that it became a permanent fragrance, as the smell of tobacco or alcohol clings to others, affecting their very temper and metabolism; it had become virulent, a kind of secretion.

Puffing at his cigarette, he proceeded to talk. "These *maquisards*," he began, with an analytical air. "It's a strange thing. Very strange."

"We approve of them," interrupted the lawyer, "in principle only. Be clear on this point: we also resent them; they are a rash on the skin of a bedridden body."

"The *maquis*," continued Amedée dreamily, "isn't anything distinct or crystallized, as we like to imagine. It is only a nervous shadow. It fluctuates with the time of the day, with the news, with the weather. It has no list of members. There are the big ones and the little ones, the savage ones and the intellectual ones, the leftish ones and the rightish ones, the careful ones and the desperadoes. . . ."

"You are from Paris," interrupted the lawyer with impatience. "You do not know them. I know them. I come from Oyonnax. They do their killing and their exploding, and then they go away and we who remain at home take all the punishment. They come and eat with us, not without a certain condescension, mind you: and we shelter them and give them clothes. And then suddenly comes a killing or an explosion and they are gone. And we take all the punishment. We see our villages burned to the ground; we see the old men and the young ones taken off and shot. And so it goes, on and on."

"That is so," said the old curate. "That is precisely so."

"Yes. It is so," said the old peasant woman in her Haute-Savoie accent. She glanced quickly at the negro Quivar and then back at the curate.

There was a moment's pause. The people in the wagon all held their breath and listened. There had been a sound of murmuring voices from the direction of the lake; the sound evaporated. The night grew trancelike, intensely still; the immobility was so complete that it developed, in two or three seconds, a delicate, spon-

taneous agitation of its own. The travellers began to relax again, but a ripple of malaise continued in the low, loose monotone of their voices.

"They are all a part of a shadow," continued Amedée, in his unreal, didactic manner. "Here one moment, there the next. Nameless, ragged, ready to die. All linked together, but the link remains invisible."

"You make heroes of them, monsieur," said the lawyer Yernaux sharply. "Sometimes we in the villages can't help wondering. Will they ever really help? Perhaps they will merely breed more bitterness? More bloodshed? Nevertheless, we accept them. We watch our lifelong earnings go up in flames and we see our friends taken off and shot, but we accept it, we approve, with regret to be sure but without hesitation. That is the point. Be clear on that. We have learned to be hard."

They lapsed into silence. Amedée finished his cigarette and, tapping Ulysse on the shoulder with a crooked middle finger, gave it to him for a last long puff. Then there was a rustling among the shrubs near by and a sound of cursing: "*Nom de dieu!*" The thin man in the black hat emerged from the shrubs and said irritably: "Please. Now follow me, messieurs."

As they climbed from the wagon Jean-Nicolas observed a swift, groping glance of uncertainty passed from one to the other; a glance so faint and momentary that it might have meant nothing at all. The driver coughed and turned his horses; and as Jean-Nicolas crouched to follow Milliquet through the bushes, he could hear the slow sturdy sound of the horses' hoofs digging into the mud and then the squeak of the wheels turning back to St. Jorioz.

Chapter Five

THREE willow trees stood on the edge of the shore, their roots clenched against the water, their massive trunks and

delicately spraying twigs silhouetted against the lake. Milliquet turned and motioned with his hand: "Two moments, please, messieurs." He walked with his head bent under the willows and knelt by the water; and looked first carefully up and then carefully down the lake.

Then Jean-Nicolas saw him raise his hand and beckon twice, quickly. Nothing was moving on the moonlit lake, which was rippling southward behind the silhouetted willows. Again they waited, and then, just as Jean-Nicolas was on the verge of asking a question, a boat came into sight, three yards away, directly alongside the shore.

It came gliding to a halt at the foot of the willow trees, softly scraping against the roots. A man in a *béret*, bare to the waist like Quivar, and with a villainous-looking beard, was holding the oars. For a moment no one spoke. Jean-Nicolas could hear the oars dripping.

"You're Jean le Petit?" asked Milliquet.

The man nodded carelessly. "How many?" he said in a hoarse, contemptuous voice with a Burgundian flavour.

"Eight."

"Too many," grunted the boatman.

"Can you take six?" said Milliquet.

"Six is too many." The man spat into the water. "Five is too many. I can't take more than four."

"Look," began Milliquet. "You could take six if you—"

"I'll take four," said the boatman in a quiet, savage way.

"We can pay you," suggested the thin man, with sudden politeness.

"For four," said the boatman, manœuvring his oars and looking across the lake toward Talloires.

The rest stood uneasily and gazed across the lake; then Yernaux the lawyer said: "You can make two trips, perhaps?"

"For how much?"

"Double pay."

"Triple pay," muttered the boatman, "and I'll do it."

Milliquet drew in his breath and then said, in a slow furious hiss: "Look, my man. You know what you're here for. You know whose orders. You know what can happen to you. You'll do as I suggest and as is fair, and promptly."

The boatman turned his shaggy head toward Milliquet and spat again into the water. In all that he said and did there was a carelessness and a brutality and at the same time a strange, impressive dignity: they watched him in silence.

The boatman said to Milliquet: "I'll take four now. I'll be back in fifty minutes. Then I'll take the others. Get in. Four of you. Now." Then he turned his massive torso, which was studded with coils of hair, and swiftly and effortlessly backed the boat into the shore.

The old curate and the peasant woman and the thin man Milliquet stepped into the boat.

"One more," said the boatman.

The negro came up and entered the boat. Then, without another word, his naked chest swiftly receding into the darkness, the boatman drew the boat from the shore. Milliquet sat in the back, beside the negro; the curate and the peasant woman sat huddled side by side in the front of the boat. And a moment later they all lost their identity and the boat was a dark, sliding thing with four merging shadows being borne by a fifth across the moonlit water. The glittering wake of the boat and the double trail of the dripping oars slowly widened and softened, and then they too lost identity.

For several minutes the four men remained silent, listening to the gnats, watching the water: there was no longer any trace of the boat.

"Tell me, monsieur," inquired Ulysse suddenly, turning to Yernaux, "tell me, monsieur, what is the first thing you would do on the day war is over? If you could do whatever you wished?" He placed his arms around his

knees and placed his dark cheek sideways upon his elbow.

"According to my fantasy?" said Yernaux with a gentle irony.

"According to your fantasy, Monsieur Yernaux."

"I shall go to the Chapon Fin in Oyonnax and sit down to a dinner of *escargots* and *pâté* with truffles from Nancy and a guinea-hen and a bottle of Château-neuf-du-Pape. Simple, you might say, but good."

"You would sit and dine alone?"

"Naturally," sighed Yernaux. "I am not gregarious at such moments."

"And you?" Ulysse turned to Jean-Nicolas.

"Well, I think I'll take a little boat," replied Jean-Nicolas rather shyly, "and go sailing out as far as I can, fishing. I will lie in the sun and fish all day long, and all night I'll lie in the moonlight and drink champagne. That's what I'd like to do the day the war ends."

"Alone?" said Ulysse wistfully.

"I think alone," said Jean-Nicolas. Then he added, addressing Ulysse: "And what would you do, monsieur?"

"I will go to Cannes," declared Ulysse without hesitation, "and walk up and down the Croisette. I'll go gambling at night in the Ambassadeurs, and in the afternoon, at teatime, I'll sit and watch the ladies in their expensive beach clothes. And at night I'll go to the Bastide and pick up three lovely girls and bring them home with me."

"You are a man of the world, I see," said the lawyer with sarcasm. "But there will be no Croisette. There will be no Bastide or Ambassadeurs.".

"I have never lived like that," said Ulysse timidly. "And it must be lovely." He turned his head and looked at Amedée. "What would you do, Amedée?"

"I would sit," said Amedée with dignity, "in a castle in Germany, with a bottle of Rhine wine and a copy of Montaigne. I would sit at a window and drink and read,

and occasionally glance into the courtyard and watch the beheadings. A judicious blending, you might say, of the agreeable and the edifying." He sighed with satisfaction.

Then he rose with a grunt and moved into the deeper grasses, where he lay down and closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep.

The night drifted more closely about them. The ripples had ceased. The moon was behind a cloud. The world beyond lost all vestige of precision.

They waited another ten minutes. Jean-Nicolas felt himself immersed, irresistibly, in a flood of speculations.

An odd, equivocal light had begun to colour everything he saw and heard. Something in the journey had already gone wrong; but what? One of the travellers was planning to betray them; but who? He listened to every word, he watched intently the most casual gesture: but instead of drawing closer to a perception of the true and false, the good and the evil, he felt himself gradually sucked deeper and deeper into a cave of almost feverish uncertainty. Nothing meant what it appeared to mean any longer. It was as though, in the darkness of occupied France, mankind had withdrawn into a far deeper, far more basic and obscure region of human motives; and he himself felt lost among them; lost in a black, impenetrable jungle. He waited: for the boat to return, for the moon to emerge, for his mind to clear. A moment of panic seized him. Only four days were allowed him: was it enough? Would even four weeks, would four years be enough?

"Listen," said Ulysse suddenly.

Through the silence they could hear the sound of oars.

Chapter Six

THE boatman rose as the boat nudged the shore and reached among the willows to steady himself.

"And now the rest of you," he mutterly sourly. "It's late. The four of you. If you please."

Now that he was standing near by, Jean-Nicolas could see that the boatman's entire chest and arms were covered, not with hair as he had thought, but with a tangle of tattoos: dragons, anchors, odalisques.

They stepped on the boat, first Yernaux and Jean-Nicolas, and then Amedée and Ulysse. When Amedée limped forward and jumped, the boat slid away; he stumbled, one foot splashed into the shallow water and he scraped his shin against the hull. Jean-Nicolas could hear the skin ripping softly. He grunted with pain and crawled clumsily on his stomach over the side of the boat.

"Quick, monsieur," said the boatman ruthlessly.

Amedée stared at him with detestation.

"Ready?"

The boatman thrust his right oar against the tangle of willow roots. The boat tilted and slid forth through the reeds, which hissed against the side of the boat.

Yernaux and Jean-Nicolas sat in the back; Amedée and Ulysse in the front.

Now the boat began to glide forward in long, searching measures. The oars whined rhythmically. Jean-Nicolas could smell the warm tar and the warm sun-dried wood of the boat; and then the fragrance of the mossy shore and the reeds and willows was gone and instead rose the heaving, slightly rotten smell of the lake.

No one spoke. Amedée sat quietly, nursing his bleeding shin, eyes closed. Ulysse leaned his head back and looked at the sky. Now the moon swam forth through a web of clouds and the lake was alive with moonlight, seeming wilder and more perilous where the shadow of clouds still cloaked the shore.

"Look," whispered Ulysse.

They looked up at the stars. Some planes were passing overhead: they saw nothing but they could hear them, a

watery purr. These went and then a few more followed, this time so low that Jean-Nicolas imagined that he could see their outlines clearly against the slow, dilating clouds. One seemed to pass directly in front of the moon. For a moment, it seemed, a faint shadow flickered across the boat.

"English?" said Ulysse.

"One never knows," said Yernaux.

"American I think," said Amedée grimly. "On their way to Milan or Genoa."

Jean-Nicolas knew that they were American.

"The others are waiting?" Jean-Nicolas asked the boatman.

The boatman nodded, and a moment later Jean-Nicolas found the boatman's ruthless, penetrating eyes gazing impassively into his own.

A vague, unmotivated feeling of oppression fell over them.

"This war," declared Yernaux, "has been an unnatural thing for France. It is unnatural for France to lie desolate. It doesn't suit her climate. It doesn't suit her landscape. Look," he said, his arm pointing across the lake. "This is the wrong setting for violence."

"But the French understand suffering," asserted Ulysse loyally.

"Suffering of a different kind," said Yernaux.

Then after a pause, Amedée said bitterly: "And what are we suffering for?"

Jean-Nicolas could see Yernaux's brilliant little eyes grow sharp beneath the pince-nez, and could hear him take a deep breath. Then Yernaux said quite calmly: "Let me tell you one thing, my friend. I love my country; and you likewise love it. But what we loved was never its power or its wealth or its reputation. What we loved in France was not its efficiency or power. What we loved was its soil and its traditions, its flesh and its bones. And let me tell you another thing. I would rather my country

were miserable and weak but inhabited by free men than rich and powerful but inhabited by slaves. I assure you, my friend," he said with feeling, "I would rather be a humble cobbler in Liechtenstein than a *komissar* in the most resplendent autocracy in Europe!"

Now they were in the middle of the lake. The shore was nothing but a fringe of fur to the east and the west. In front of them, dissociated from the shore, textureless and geometrical, rose the single towering peak of La Tournette. The clouds were drifting southward toward the greater mountains.

And a strange sense of spatial and temporal removal came over Jean-Nicolas. The moonlight now was transforming the lake in front of them into a finely etched coverlet of white flames. Behind them lay the blue and surfaceless water, uncorroded by light, suggestive of nothing but depth. And as the boat continually approached the flickering, flame-dented region before them, whose frontier was continually receding, it was as though the layer of skin were being slowly withdrawn from time itself; and as though the boat were hovering on a glowing arc bridging the future: bridging crisis and history, bridging suffering and oblivion.

"What," said Ulysse softly, "will happen to France, I keep wondering? What will happen to us all?"

But no one answered; and at this moment something drew Jean-Nicolas' attention to the boatman.

The boatman had said not a word. Now he came to a rest, poising the oars with a sigh and slowly drawing a black handkerchief over his face. His tattooed arms were shining like serpents. The skin, ornately patterned, seemed to be covered with scales.

And then he began to row again, massively bending and unbending. The boat went gliding windlessly. The oars whined and whispered.

"Where are we landing?" asked Yernaux, wiping the mist from his pince-nez.

"In an inlet beyond Talloires," said the boatman slowly. "Between Talloires and Menthon."

The shore to the east grew clearer now, and they could see the roof-tops of Talloires angular against the sky.

As they drew near the shore, toward the wooded spaces which left Talloires far to the right of them, Yernaux broke the silence again.

"Who has the guns?"

"The negro and Milliquet have the only guns," said Amedée dourly.

There was the hissing of the reeds under the boat again. The shore leapt toward them: it was far closer than it looked. The boatman turned again in his tense magnetic way and held the oars at a steady angle in the water, and then guided the boat with leisurely flicks of the oar.

The boat came to a halt beside a granite-like rock and they stepped on to the land. The others were sitting and waiting motionless on a rock above the shore, passing a single cigarette to and fro. They said nothing, but when Yernaux climbed over the rocks they silently rose.

Now Milliquet came down to the shore to pay the boatman. He whispered to the boatman and quickly repeated a phrase that Jean-Nicolas could not hear. Then he joined the rest. The boatman continued to sit in the boat, facing the lake he had crossed, his colossal shoulders hunched and shining.

"Thank you," said Jean-Nicolas to the boatman, and placed a hundred-franc note on the seat beside him. "And farewell to you."

But the boatman, deep in a kind of primeval reverie, did not look at him and did not even reply.

The old curate and the peasant woman came forward to say farewell.

"We are leaving you, Albertine and I," said the curate, with a gentle ceremoniousness.

"We are going on to Talloires," said the peasant woman.

"May God be with you," whispered the curate.

"God bless you," said the peasant woman. "And you too, Quivar," she turned to the great negro. "God bless you, my child.

The old couple turned and followed the bridle path that led along the shore toward Talloires. Their dark, lean shapes moved and mingled and then vanished among the tree trunks.

And now?" Yernaux was saying.

"Now we enter the forest," said Milliquet.

"And how far will we walk tonight?"

"We will walk," said Milliquet in his asthmatic voice, "until we reach the river Fier. Before we reach the river Fier we must cross the highway to Thônes. That will be dangerous. There have been incidents there. And it is watched."

"And then?"

"And then we continue northward through the woods and alongside the hills."

"And how far, may I inquire," insisted Yernaux, "are we expected to walk before dawn?"

"God will guide our footsteps," put in the negro Quivar gently.

Then Ulysse asked: "Where will we sleep all day?"

"On God's earth. Under God's heaven," purred the negro.

There was something in the negro's voice which caused Milliquet to look at him: it was a look which seemed to enclose a discovery. It was a look of passive, penetrating antagonism, so restrained as to be almost imperceptible, and shot through with terror.

Jean-Nicolas turned to look at the lake; it was covered in cloud. The boat and the boatman had vanished.

Chapter Seven

THEY entered the woods. First they skirted the edge of a clearing, still hot and swarming with the recollection of dusk; and then crept through a screen of birches. And then suddenly, cavernous and cool and dark, the forest opened before them. They entered its shadow. The darkness closed around them and for a moment they saw nothing at all: then the shadows slowly materialized.

They followed Milliquet in single file up the slope along a stony path. Then the land flattened. The trees grew massive. The forest floor lay smooth and was carpeted with pine needles and tufted with ferns. Through the trunks Lake Annecy still glittered faintly and metallically below. It rose and fell to the gleam of the moon, and then the pines thickened and they saw it no more.

Now Milliquet allowed Quivar to take the lead and fell back and walked beside Jean-Nicolas. They were the last of the seven. Milliquet walked in dry long strides with stooped shoulders and a continual sigh.

"Where are the rest of you, Martin?" he began softly.

"The rest?"

"The rest that flew over tonight?"

Jean-Nicolas said: "I don't know, monsieur."

Milliquet sneezed. "My asthma," he said wearily. He was a sharp, parsimonious type of Frenchman, the type that strangers think hard and repellent. He murmured: "Why have you come with us, Martin?"

"An accident, monsieur," said Jean-Nicolas. "Nothing more."

"Accident?"

"It was pure accident, to be quite frank, that I came to the inn at that particular moment."

"Then you prefer not to tell me. Very well. It is discreet of you."

They walked on silently side by side. Then Jean-

Nicolas murmured: "You can trust me, Monsieur Milliquet."

"It isn't that," said the man in black, his voice coming slow between his asthmatic sighs. "Please don't misunderstand. It is only this. I ask you: please be careful."

He added casually: "Remember. There is, I suspect, at least one among us who is not to be trusted."

There was a sudden note of sincerity in the man's voice: a tiny, almost imperceptible note of desperate appeal. Jean-Nicolas turned to look at him. But his features were invisible, masked in shadow.

Milliquet sneezed again. "My asthma," he repeated. "I suppose it will be growing worse now."

They reached a small deserted road and the trees gave way. And there before them rose a curious array of shattered shapes and shadows. It was a moment before Jean-Nicolas realized what it was: it was a village blown to bits—by the *maquis*, perhaps, or by the Germans in reprisal, or by a few careless bombs dropped by Allied planes *en route* from Italy. The ruins were white, powdery, scentless. They pointed at the sky in spectral, tapering gestures. Here and there lay shapeless masses of stone. One or two façades were still intact, but through their porticos shone only the distant ranges and the starlit sky. The whole village was covered with white dust and the moonlight scattered masklike shadows over the ground. They were peasant houses. Their ruins had nothing of the dignity of ruins, only a frail and humble pathos.

An iron balcony hung precariously over what must have been the village square. In the middle of the square stood the village pump. Jean-Nicolas walked up: it was still intact. He touched it and the touch was sleek and cool where year after year peasant hands had polished it; polished it until the cool black iron had at last assumed something of their patient, caressing texture.

He climbed a small stairway; Ulysse and Amedée

followed and stood beside him. The surrounding walls had been torn away. Only the stairway remained. It led from the street to a room which retained nothing save its floor and façade. It was like standing on the edge of a precipice: the ground fell deeply into the valley below. They leaned out, all three, through the single window in the single wall.

"See the stars? I feel that I know them better already," said Ulysse.

"They are our instruments," mused Amedée. "We have turned, all of us, into navigators on a secret sea."

"They are our friends," said Ulysse. "Now nature is our ally."

"Ah," said Amedée, "think of nature as an ally, Ulysse, and you will surely be destroyed. Nature watches and waits, ready to devour, ready to pulverize. The stars are watching us like cats; ready to spring."

"Look," repeated Ulysse. He pointed. There was a pattern of planes flying surprisingly low through the brightness of the sky.

"Those are the heroes," said Ulysse tenderly.

Amedée nodded. "Those are the death-bringers."

"To them death means nothing," said Ulysse, stirred with wonder.

"Their hearts are remote from the world. They are like chemicals."

"No, no, Amedée. They are men like you and me. Lonely too; maybe puzzled too," said Ulysse musingly. "Do they hope? Do they fear? Up there so high? Loaded with destruction?"

At the base of the stairway the negro Quivar and Yernaux and Milliquet were sitting and smoking. Yernaux's face was wet with sweat and he was still panting.

He looked around at the ruins. "Look," he said. "What's left of it? Nothing but memories. What's left of the France we loved, the France of our happiness? Memories, my friends; only memories."

Ulysse had been listening. He murmured: "Yes. The tidy little shops. The cosy little gardens."

"And the picnics in the Bois de Boulogne," said Amedée. "The canoes and the gramophones."

Suddenly Jean-Nicolas felt that his companions, ten minutes previously still dulled and isolated by distrust, had been drawn into harmony; the warm, contagious imagery of their memories had drawn them together; their voices had mellowed.

"It seems a thousand years ago," said Yernaux.

"It seems like a heartbreaking dream," murmured Ulysse.

"The *coq-au-vin* and the wonderful omelettes," said Yernaux, his pince-nez gleaming.

"The expensive holidays at Nice and St.-Jean-de-Luz," said Amedée, rather bitterly.

Ulysse, always observant, pointed among the ruins.

The village square, the stubble around the base of the arches, had grown suddenly alive. It was like the firm line in an engraving beginning to vibrate. The firm kernels of shadow grew uneasy, split, and vanished. Then Jean-Nicolas saw what it was. The rats had emerged. First only a few, only enough to draw a fluid tremor through the ruins. Then more; fifty; a hundred; a thousand.

Then they were countless. They flowed from the toothless porticos wherever he looked, rippling cascades of them. Fat, sleek maggots: on what had they been feeding? They had grown fierce and fearless, they were travelling in liquid, nauseating hordes.

"Let us go," said Milliquet with a sigh, as though this were a thing he had seen many times.

He took up his gun and the others raised their knapsacks and hurled their cigarette butts into the valley. From below came the sweet, enveloping smell of the pines,

Chapter Eight

THE night was at its darkest now. The moon had vanished. As they crept along the edge of the valley they saw they had entered a chasm black and indistinguishable on all sides. There were no landmarks. Now and again Quivar took out a small flashlight from his pocket to make sure of the way. Each time that the light shone forth Jean-Nicolas saw the colossal silhouette rise in front of him; and he felt, as they moved more deeply into the woods, the negro's body beginning to blossom with a secret exultation.

They came to a clearing and at last could see the whole area of the stars, from summit to summit. Now Quivar was walking close beside Jean-Nicolas and said: "There behind us is the peak of the Tournette, monsieur. That one in front of us is the Parmelan. We shall cross the Fier and then keep to the left of the Parmelan. Then we go north-west and northward and north-west and westward for another two nights."

"And then?"

"And then we are in Switzerland, monsieur."

"That is the path that our friend intends to follow?" Jean-Nicolas nodded toward Milliquet.

Quivar's voice hung in the air, low and tentative. "So I believe, monsieur."

"It is the best path?"

"It is the only path nowadays, monsieur."

"You have done this journey before?"

"Not this same journey, monsieur. But I know the country well." The negro's voice was full of a dark, hovering excitement.

"Listen," whispered Jean-Nicolas; he groped for the negro's name.

"Call me Quivar, monsieur."

"Listen, Quivar. Will we all arrive safely? All of us? What do you think?"

The negro turned his limpid animal gaze toward Jean-Nicolas. "It is not for me to be a prophet, monsieur."

"You know them all, Quivar?" Jean-Nicolas nodded at the rest. "You know them to be right?"

"It is not for me to know," said the negro. "I am an ignorant man."

"You know the one with the black hat?"

Again the warm dark hesitation appeared in the negro's voice. "I know nothing," he murmured. "I am an ignorant man, monsieur."

They walked silently on.

Jean-Nicolas felt his eyes growing accustomed to this deeper darkness, and now he could see the shapes of the mountainside, recumbent and archaic under the stars. They crossed a small plain; he could see the mountain ferns spreading their rippling patterns under the starlight.

"And now please be careful," said Milliquet. "Please follow me closely."

A shimmer hung in the darkness beyond the trees: not glossy enough to be water, yet one could feel that water was there. It was a swamp covered with the luminous froth of decomposition. They halted. Droves of mosquitoes swept over them from every side.

"The road is just beyond," said Milliquet tensely. "Thirty metres away. Wait for me here."

He crept through the swampy ferns and wild irises and disappeared beyond the trees.

Quivar passed round his cigarettes and then came and crouched beside Jean-Nicolas. Jean-Nicolas felt there was something the negro wanted to say, but he said nothing.

"What is wrong?" said Amedée thinly. "I feel there is something wrong."

"It is like being in a prison," said Vernaux. "There is a stink of decay."

"I feel we are being watched," whispered Ulysse. "I almost feel we are being followed."

They sat down on a log, the five of them in a row, smoking two cigarettes at a time to keep the mosquitoes away. For several minutes no one spoke.

At last Ulysse broke the silence: "I have just been thinking, Amedée."

"Yes? Thinking about what, Ulysse?"

"About freedom, Amedée," said Ulysse in his vague, rather imploring way. He took a deep breath. "What is freedom? I have escaped from a prison; yet I feel more imprisoned than ever."

"Freedom is like the Latin god of the doorways," said Yernaux. "It has two faces."

"We all seem to long for freedom," said Amedée. "And yet it is strange. The closer we come to it, the more it evades us. The moment we try to seize it, its features evaporate."

"It seems unbelievable," said Ulysse, with a sudden leap of yearning, "that there are still countries where men are happy and free."

"In tyrannous countries," Yernaux went on, his gleaming pince-nez giving a magisterial, rather froglike look to his face: "in tyrannous countries men also, many of them, are happy and believe themselves to be free. They are ignorant of any other life. Each small act they come to interpret as a sign of liberation, and the chains that dangle from their souls remain invisible. For them it is freedom to take a holiday, to buy a cravat, to select their own cigarettes, to choose a wife. They know no other freedom."

"Yes," said Amedée bitterly in reply, "but are we any freer, Monsieur Yernaux? Instead of being purposefully guided by a shrewd autocracy we are obscurely and capriciously guided by our families, our newspapers, our schoolmates. Is it really much better? In one case the bondage is planned and communal. In the other it is fortuitous and lonely. But the bondage remains; there is no escape; mankind remains in its everlasting prison."

"We spend our life in chains," Yernaux agreed with melancholy. "But, my friend, our right to cast off our chains as we grow wiser and older and to profit from our inevitable bondage: that is the point. The right to choose. The right, though we may not employ it, to explore and illuminate. The right to tragedy. That is what I mean by freedom, monsieur."

"Why do you say tragedy, Monsieur Yernaux?" inquired Ulysse. "What has freedom to do with tragedy?"

"Everything, monsieur. Tragedy is a kind of ecstasy, an exaltation. It is the trivial-minded, mechanical man who is incapable of tragedy. Tragedy occurs only to free men; to men who live on the crest of life and who refuse to accept equalization or defeat. Tragedy is the medal which fate pins on the fallen hero, it is the final acknowledgment of a man's dignity."

The blackness of the night was crouching over the swamp. In the intervals of silence the throbbing of frogs grew audible, a sound so low and continual that it perished as pure sound; it lingered on like a fragrance, like a colour, like a mood. Now and then there would be a small splash or a bubble of marshy grass rising to the surface and bursting; and always there was the thin, lunatic whine of the mosquitoes.

"It is our longing," said Ulysse suddenly, "which imprisons us. The longing for fulfilment. And that is why men become sad. That is why men become degraded."

"Think of Diogenes," said Amedée. "He found freedom by deciding to live in a tub, or something of the sort, if I am not mistaken. For some of us it might have seemed like a prison. For him it was freedom: freedom from falsities, freedom from desires."

The tension of the night rose and subsided, according to some invisible pattern in the air. Fifteen minutes ago they had been filled with discomfort. And now, as they sat in a row on the log, smoking and waiting, Jean-

Nicolas felt how a deep sense of reassurance began to rise in them all; a solemnity, almost a joy.

"Do you remember," said Yernaux, "what Sophocles said? When he was an old man of eighty, at the end of all his greatness, he said that his final release from fleshly desires was like an escape from a mad and cruel master!"

"Plato," said Ulysse, nodding, "likewise observed that no man is free who is governed by his passions; passions enslave; the true tyrants are our passions."

"And there was another one too," said Yernaux, "who spoke of freedom. That terrifying man, St. Paul, once said that those who free themselves from justice become the slaves of sin; and a far more appalling bondage awaits them."

"And it is the libertine," said Amedée, "who, in the utter freedom of his bed, draws the chains still more tightly around his heart and his soul."

"I have known such men," said Yernaux, nodding gravely.

"And there is," said Amedée bitterly, "no such thing as real freedom."

Yernaux peered thoughtfully at the swamp through his pince-nez.

At that moment Milliquet returned. His thin shadow stood suddenly in front of them. He said: "We are leaving instantly, messieurs. We are crossing the highway."

"It is safe now?" murmured Quivar in his curious melodious purr.

He gazed calmly at Milliquet. His eyes were almost free of intellect, but in their blackness lurked an awareness far more astute than intellect; he gazed at Milliquet with a black, extremely gentle loathing.

"It is safe," said Milliquet, his voice needle-fine under the effort of self-control. "Please follow me, messieurs."

They rose and followed him through the ferns and wild irises. The swamp water whimpered under their

footsteps. Then the highway appeared through a mist of willow leaves: a long, pallid strip of desolation. They crossed and entered the thicket again.

Chapter Nine

The grip of darkness was loosening. The peak of the Parmelan rose sharply on their right. Behind it the stars were dissolving like sand in a gentle and widening shell of grey.

They had been walking for three hours. No one had spoken for at least an hour. A throbbing weariness had risen in Jean-Nicolas, rising from the feet through the pit of the stomach and along the throat to his eyes and his temples and his brain. The ache from the jump was slowly reviving; there was a dull, hot throbbing in his hip.

He was walking behind Quivar and Milliquet. He could see the gun bobbing on Quivar's great black shoulder, and he could hear the asthmatic hissing of Milliquet's breath. Behind him came Yernaux. Now and then he looked round and saw Yernaux's face, pearly with moisture and gluttonous, and the gleam of his pince-nez bobbing along through the pine shadows. The great trees had vanished and on the next slope there were only small pines, small birches, small oaks. The light of the early morning crept nearer.

Now Yernaux broke the silence. "I am dying of thirst." His voice was faint and pitiful. He was the weariest one of all.

"Soon we'll come to a stream," said Quivar. "The Fillière. Wonderful cold sweet water, monsieur."

"Don't torture us," said Yernaux. "How much further is it to the Fillière?"

"We are almost there," said Quivar gently. "Patience, monsieur. Only a little longer."

"It is the things we ate at St. Jorioz for supper," said Amedée. "Those snails. Those eels."

"It is the sultriness," murmured Quivar, in his French of the Antilles. "It is the heat of the night."

"I think it is the anxiety," observed Ulysse. "Anxiety and suspense make a man thirsty."

Jean-Nicolas too felt thirsty. But he felt sorry for Yernaux.

Then they heard the water. It sounded like a child singing. It came through the greyness of the air and the trees, only a strand in the massive fabric of the forest; but sweet and exact, a strand of melody, a strand of hope. Nothing had ever sounded lovelier to Jean-Nicolas than the sound of the Fillière that early morning.

They lay down on their stomachs on the mossy ground and drank. Jean-Nicolas felt the water rippling over his temples, cooling his eyelids, flowing like a living thing into his throat. Food to the hungry is a relief, he thought, and sleep to the sleepy is a blessing; but water to the thirsty is a kind of dazzling miracle, a thing whose texture and sound and transparency penetrate the aching membranes and sing in the nerves.

They sat at rest by the edge of the stream and felt the dawn creeping closer. Their heads were dripping with cold mountain water. The big negro distributed the cigarettes again, one for each man. Then they rose and slowly waded across the shallow, icy stream.

They climbed the opposite shore and felt the first fingering warmth of the day. A new colour appeared suddenly in the sky: a wild portentous crimson, a single streak of it just over the hill.

The path led along the crest of a wooded slope, precisely parallel to the Fillière. The quick exuberant clucking of the water among the pebbles continued.

The sound of the water grew gradually louder: it grew episodic, abrupt.

"Listen," said Quivar, creeping slowly along the crest.

They had come to a parting of the trees. Quivar halted; he raised his great black arm.

They heard him calmly whisper two words:

"German soldiers."

The electric leap of tension in Jean-Nicolas dissolved, as he gazed, into a pang of wonder.

The German soldiers were astride their horses, naked and pale. Their uniforms lay in small heaps among the birches. Their bodies were uniformly white below the waist and a golden brown above the waist; their faces and hands were a ruddy, weather-beaten brown. They were all boys in their teens; hardly more than schoolboys, chests hairless and shallow. There were seven of them, six blond and one dark. They were riding their brown horses into the stream where the water was deep, until the smooth dark water lapped at their thighs. A rosy morning light was filtering in misty shafts through the birches. The horses turned a dark, silky brown and the soldiers began to sparkle with drops as they splashed deeper and deeper. The horses snorted with the thrill of the cold water, and the German soldiers, with faces so curiously solemn and youthless, began to smile a little. Behind them the white trunks of the birches began to shimmer with a golden light; their leaves began to sparkle in the flush of the sunrise and cast blue shadows across the lean, immature bodies.

The Frenchmen sat crouched among the shrubs and looked down. Jean-Nicolas hardly knew what he felt; almost nothing; nothing but a grave, rather puzzled detachment.

One of the soldiers began to sing:

Ach, du lieber Augustin.

Quivar crouched behind a log and his fingers began to caress his gun.

"Come," said Milliquet thinly. "Let us leave them."

Quivar said nothing. Jean-Nicolas could see the trickle

of sweat from his black woolly armpits. He had become, suddenly, incalculable and wild. The same brutal gleam appeared in his eyes which Jean-Nicolas had seen once before. The sweat rolled down his black torso; there was a pungent, ammoniac odour.

Milliquet seemed tense and preoccupied. He was sighing with asthma.

"No, no," he said suddenly, as Quivar crouched silently. "Listen, negro. This is bad. This is stupid. Let us leave them."

Quivar didn't answer but drew forth his gun and placed it on the log.

Now the German soldiers were in the middle of the stream. They were scooping handfuls of water over the horses, soaking the horses' heads and manes. Everywhere there was a splashing of water; the drops leapt and sparkled in the wild red sunlight. Everywhere the air shone with glittering red sprays, and there was a strange timorous exultation in the air; only the boys' faces remained solemn; even their smiles were intent and solemn.

Milliquet knelt quietly beside Quivar. His eyes were almost closed and his mouth was twitching slightly above the teeth: it looked as though he were about to strangle Quivar.

He said softly: "Listen, negro. There are seven—you can't get them all."

Quivar was placing his eye behind the gun-sight.

"Listen," said Milliquet, on the point of hysteria. "There may be seventy more near by."

The rest looked away. They could hear the splashing water and one of the German voices singing:

Ach, du lieber Augustin,
Alles ist weg.

Milliquet whispered, in dry, mechanical tones: "Listen to me, negro. This is you who are doing this. Remember. You and you only." His voice broke and fell away helplessly.

The shots rang out in rapid succession. Jean-Nicolas looked down among the birches. The scene froze instantaneously. The water stopped splashing and the singing stopped. The horses and the soldiers stopped moving altogether. Nothing moved until one of the German soldiers slipped slowly from his horse into the water, without a sound almost and without a splash.

Then two more shots sounded. Another soldier leapt from his horse a few inches, as though the horse had started galloping; then he fell forward, his arms around the neck of his horse and his head bent low, his face lost in the horse's mane. The horse remained motionless and then turned its head slowly, in a mounting panic. This second soldier had been the dark-haired soldier.

All this took only five seconds. Then the horses turned swiftly and the scene swung abruptly back into motion. There was a sound of splashing and the horses' hoofs feverishly scraping among the pebbles.

Milliquet turned and strode quickly down the hill through the thicket. The others followed. The stream fell instantly out of sight and soon there was silence again.

Quivar rejoined them five minutes later. When he saw Quivar's black, expressionless face, drenched in sweat, Ulysse said gently: "War is a cruel thing."

But neither Milliquet nor Quivar had anything to say.

Ulysse repeated, shaking his head, and his kind little voice thick with pity: "There is nothing in the world, messieurs, so cruel as a war."

The shadow of the hill suddenly fell away and the burning brightness of sunrise shot through the boughs.

Chapter Ten

THEY crossed the shallow water of the Fillière and climbed and clung to the wooded hillside. Through the boughs they could see the town of Thorens as it lay still and

shimmering in the morning vapours. They crept on wearily in the direction of St. Pierre de Rumilly until at last Yernaux said, with real anguish: "I can go no further."

His pearly face seemed to have shrunk; there was nothing left of the cunning lawyer and the gourmet, only a weary little gnome with garlic sweating from every pore and a face pink with insect bites. "You can go on," he whispered, "if you wish. But I can go no further."

Amedée looked at his watch. "Ten minutes to six," he moaned. "My feet are full of needles."

"We will stop and sleep," said Quivar gently. "Enough is enough for the first night."

They were standing in a grove of enormous oak trees, in the middle of a valley from which hayfields spread out like an hour-glass on either side. The place was hidden and remote and there was not a house to be seen in any direction, only the road to Bonneville beyond the fields to the west, emptily wandering through the morning mist.

Milliquet said cautiously: "It is better to go another three kilometres."

"We can go no further," said Quivar in his velvety purr.

"I beg your pardon, monsieur," said Milliquet, in the tone of controlled crisis which had now grown habitual: "I have made my suggestion."

"Weariness is hanging from me like a chain," declared Amedée. "I can hardly stand."

They were placing their knapsacks on the ground and lying down under the largest of the oaks.

"I am too weary even to sleep," continued Amedée anxiously. "Please, Monsieur Yernaux. . . . You have the brandy bottle?"

Yernaux brought out his bottle of Monnet and the negro gave each one another cigarette. Everyone was itching with the sweat and the insects, and now with a sigh of joy Amedée passed the brandy bottle on to Ulysse. "Have a swallow, my little friend."

Ulysse leaned back his head and let the brandy roll down his throat. Tears came to his eyes. "A bottle is a miraculous thing, a talisman. It restores hope instantaneously."

"That is the function of a good bottle. It kills despair," moaned Yernaux, beginning to recover.

"It repairs the imagination. It restores the taste for adventure. Mental as well as physical, my good Ulysse," said Amedée with unexpected tenderness. The bottle went round again and everyone became less sleepy suddenly.

Ribbons of morning fog were floating over the fields, motionless but now and then illuminated by a sudden dart of sunlight. In the field toward the west the cattle were moving. They looked haggard and stiff; they moved very slowly through pools of mist like prehistoric beasts, and sometimes the sheet of mist was so thick that it covered them, and as they raised their heads their horns protruded from the mist like fallen boughs from the water.

Now the mists were evaporating. Over the chessboard of smooth ploughed fields on the slopes which rose beyond the pastureland and the hayfields hung a lilac shimmer.

"Look," said Ulysse with sudden amazement. "Only France has this kind of sunlight. Clear and sweet and yet spiced with antiquity. Each colour wonderful and golden clear and about to burst into a thousand crystals. And yet infinitely calm and suave and passive. Only France, my dear Amedée, could have produced a Monet or a Cézanne."

"Yes," said Amedée. "It is different, for example, in England. The English sunlight is golden too, but elusive. The colours fade and retire. Only the incessant green remains and gives a kind of dispassionate dreamy elegance."

"The Spanish sunlight," said Ulysse, "is hard and brutal. Think of Goya. No green, only brown and yellow and red, with a gash of darkness which reminds

one of a cave. A background for violence: you perceive what I mean, Amedée?"

Amedée nodded his head discreetly and Ulysse went on impetuously: "Yes, and the Italian light is a little hard too, but full of a certain resilience and glamour. The sunlight trembles on the leaves in Tuscany and casts hot grape-coloured shadows, and all the time I was there I thought of human beings perpetually living and dying. Human nature itself seems to quiver on the rays of sunlight in Italy." Then he paused and said to Amedée, rather humbly: "And Greece? You've been in Greece?"

"Greece," replied Amedée, "has become a dream and that is all. Greece is beyond good and evil, and the sunlight in Greece, Ulysse, is the arid, depopulated sunlight of eternity."

Quivar, lying to the left of Jean-Nicolas, seemed to be listening intently. His great black eyes rolled to and fro. He too was a bit tipsy. Now he turned and smiled at Jean-Nicolas suddenly and reached over and laid his great black hand on his shoulder. "I am your friend, monsieur," he whispered, his teeth glittering.

"Tell me," began Jean-Nicolas, and hesitated.

"Call me Quivar," said the negro.

"Tell me, Quivar. You too are crossing to Switzerland?"

The negro nodded. He glanced at the others; they had fallen asleep. And the two of them began to speak in a low whisper. Jean-Nicolas felt again, but more vividly than before, an occult solidarity between himself and the negro; as though they were in pursuit of the same secret goal.

"Why, Quivar? Where are you going?"

"I have my duties, Monsieur Martin. Martin; that is your true name?" The negro kept smiling.

"It is my true name, Quivar. Tell me."

"Yes, monsieur?"

"These others. Who are they?"

"A lawyer from Oyonnax. A painter. A poet. Both from Paris. That is all I know."

"They are all crossing?"

Quivar nodded; his smile receded into secrecy. "They too have duties. Special duties. Very special duties, monsieur."

"And the man in black?" Jean-Nicolas watched Quivar carefully.

Quivar's face remained expressionless.

"We shall see what we shall see, Monsieur Martin," he purred, his voice so soft that Jean-Nicolas could hardly hear. "And now I too shall sleep. Joyful dreams, Monsieur Martin!"

The heat of the full-blown morning softly intervened, and they laid back their heads and closed their eyes. Milliquet turned over and sneezed in his sleep; Ulysse had already begun to snore. Jean-Nicolas opened his eyes a last time to see the oak leaves glittering overhead, and then he too fell asleep.

Chapter Eleven

THE day grew warmer; as he lay there with his eyes closed, Jean-Nicolas could feel the golden turbulence of noon approaching. Insects were simmering and swarming; leaves and grasses were stirring.

He found it hard to sleep. Beside him lay Quivar snoring, and Milliquet lay groaning with asthma beside the gooseberry bushes. Near Quivar lay Yernaux, and from time to time Jean-Nicolas could hear Yernaux turn to Quivar and whisper:

"Monsieur *le nègre*."

The snoring stopped.

"Are we sure to make it in three nights?"

"I swear it, monsieur. Calm yourself. Sleep. You'll need your strength when dusk comes."

A pause. Then: "Listen, negro."
"If you please, monsieur."
"There is something wrong, negro."
"Nothing out of the usual, monsieur."
"I feel it. It is in the air, negro."
"Please, monsieur, be so kind as to sleep."

Jean-Nicolas would turn and look through the shadows at the day. It was pouring through the landscape like a flood; drenching the foliage, soaking the fields.

From the shadows where he lay he could see the fields. The sun had now usurped them wholly; it covered them with its swarms and showers; it was drenching the little stacks of spring hay in gold and printing sharp purple triangles beyond them.

Jean-Nicolas felt a slow and gentle relaxation occur in his heart; he felt that nothing in the world could be more beautiful than this scene; he felt gently and gradually stirred by a complex of memories, memories which he could neither name nor locate and which reached far deeper into the past than his boyhood. There was no wind at all. The noonday light, troubled only by the drifting clouds of insects, swam through the oak leaves and fringed them with a golden dazzle. The sky was now filled to overflowing with a deep, unexplorable blue. In the distance he could see two women in blue with white kerchiefs on their heads, stooping under the loads of hay on their shoulders. They moved very slowly across the field; they were old and weary and he could see that one of them was lame; they moved with a broken rhythm, heads bowed, faces invisible. Under a chestnut tree in the middle of the field stood a shining black mare with her shimmering black foal; the foal dazed and tremulous, fresh from the womb. All these things had spontaneously appeared, so it seemed, out of nowhere: out of his own dreams it almost seemed. He had not seen them ten minutes before.

Then he heard Yernaux cry out in his sleep; he heard

Quivar snoring. He fell asleep himself but soon woke again, the sunlight flickering on his eyes.

It must have been two o'clock when he began to feel uneasy. The rest were sleeping soundly. The day hung stagnant, the sheep bells had ceased tinkling over the hillside. The cattle lay drowsy in the distant meadows.

Jean-Nicolas sat up; he caught sight of a thing that resembled a small brown beetle, moving along the highway to Bonneville, two kilometres or so to the west. It crept slowly along the road for another five minutes, intent and ceremonious. Then it stopped and he could faintly see it hesitate, then turn off the highway into the dusty country road. He could see the dapple of the camouflage; it was a German military car.

Jean-Nicolas turned and tapped Quivar on the shoulder. The negro opened his huge black eyes and looked at him, and his gaze quickly sharpened. "Look, Quivar," Jean-Nicolas began: "have they already . . .?" He grew silent.

Quivar sat up and yawned, instantly regaining his cunning. The balloon of dust was steadily crawling along the country road.

"Best keep hidden, monsieur," he whispered calmly. "They always carry field glasses. And they always use them." He crouched and crept across the ground toward the wild gooseberry bushes, and Jean-Nicolas followed. There they knelt and through the screen of twigs they watched the car approaching.

The road led straight toward the grove and then stopped short at a mound; then it turned, and followed a ditch through the valley eastward toward the open fields. The car was moving with a slow, insectlike absorption: soon it would turn and pass the grove at a distance of sixty or seventy-five yards.

"Well, shall we wait, Quivar?"

"Best to stay as we are, monsieur."

"Shall we wake the others?"

"Best to wait, monsieur." His voice was soft and rich.

But the others were already awake, infected by a tacit sense of alarm, and Ulysse and Amedée were sitting side by side and blinking, and Milliquet had risen and was standing with his arms akimbo, watching the negro with his narrow, terrorized eyes.

Quivar slowly took up his gun and glanced calmly at the others. "We shall wait," he remarked. "None of us are to move, messieurs." Then he glanced briefly at Milliquet and said: "They cannot see us unless we move." He leaned over his gun for a moment, but instead of pointing it at the military car he placed it with a massive deliberation across his knees; he squatted there on the balls of his feet, serenely gazing at Milliquet.

Jean-Nicolas too had placed his hand instinctively on the revolver belt under his dark blue shirt; he remained crouching beside the bushes and looked back at the German car.

The car now came to a halt beside two poplar trees at the edge of the ditch. The doors opened and five German soldiers stepped out. They stood quietly for several moments and seemed to speak; but Jean-Nicolas could not hear them. They looked around, first to the west and then the east. One of them looked toward the grove and pointed. The others seemed to hesitate. A crow flew overhead, cawing hysterically. The Germans stood still, and everything was blazing with the heat of the sunlight. Jean-Nicolas could see the sunlight flashing for an instant on the monocle of one of the Germans.

Two of them were arguing angrily, so it seemed, and one was moving his arms apologetically and explaining; the other two stood quietly watching.

Nothing happened. The Germans continued to chat and then one of them, the only one in an officer's uniform, shrugged his shoulders and opened the door of the car and entered. The motor had been idling, and now a single spurt of blue smoke shot out of the exhaust as he raced the

motor. The other four climbed in and the car backed up beside the poplars and slowly turned, sending up a vapour of amethyst smoke and salmon-coloured dust, and then it groaned into second and started back along the road it had come.

Jean-Nicolas looked up; Quivar was still crouching beside him, immobile. Again he had the feeling of a primitive, prowling omniscience in the huge black body. Milliquet was still standing motionless beside a tree, his black hat perched on his narrow head; Ulysse and Amedée sat in silence and Yernaux was wiping his pince-nez.

"Very well," said Milliquet bitterly, his lips straight and hard. "And now I think we may as well move to another spot for the rest of our nap."

The car was moving smoothly along the Bonneville highway.

Quivar placed his hand softly on Jean-Nicolas' shoulder, as though to reassure him or repeat a warning. Then he too rose and placed the gun on his back.

They crossed the grove, with Quivar calmly lumbering ahead and Milliquet stooping along behind, his black hat sitting on him like a mushroom. At the edge of the grove, at the neck of the hour-glass formed by the fields, they came to a wooded knoll. This they climbed; and then for ten minutes they walked along the edge of a thicket from which they could see across the fields in both directions.

At the edge of the thicket stood a small deserted stable. Flakes of rust had gathered on the hinges of the doors, which screamed softly as they opened; and an odour of utter dereliction flew forth from the interior—rotting cloth, rotting leather, dung-drenched timber. Near the ceiling, beside a window with a cracked and dust-veiled pane, hung a hornets' nest. Everywhere lay dead flies, dead hornets, dead moths. The place contained that elaborate, phantasmal air of suspense, that superstructure

of decay which the intrusion of man annihilates in five seconds. A thousand tiny eyes seemed to be watching; a thousand tiny limbs hung on the brink of collapse.

To the right there was a stairway leading to the hayloft, and to the left stood an old coach, unused for thirty years at least, and a row of earthenware jugs, several flower-pots, numerous empty wine-bottles coated with dust, and a broken wash-basin; nothing of the slightest value and nothing that had been touched for many months.

"Up there will be best," said Quivar softly, pointing his gun up the stairway. He closed the door behind him and they laid down their knapsacks and climbed up one by one. Then they took off their shoes and lay down, weary, disconcerted, in the old, faintly wine-scented hay.

Jean-Nicolas felt his eyes irresistibly closing. He thought, for a moment, that he heard voices in the distance; but he did not know whose; the words fell away and disintegrated, like fallen insects.

Chapter Twelve

MILLIQUET was lying beside Jean-Nicolas in the hay. As they lay dozing in the heat of the afternoon he turned and said:

"Martin. That's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Listen, Martin."

"Yes?"

"You're awake?"

"Half awake, monsieur."

"Listen, Martin."

"I am listening, monsieur."

"I feel feverish, Martin. What is it?"

"The weariness, monsieur. The weariness perhaps and the strain."

There was a new and discordant quality in Milliquet's

voice. The surly cynicism was gone and a curious panic was there instead, as though he were still lost in the maze of a nightmare.

"I have been weary before, Martin, but this fever in my heart is new."

"Sleep will help you, monsieur."

"I feel a blackness in my heart, Martin. I feel a need to speak. . . . I am frightened. But of what? That is what I do not know; of something within me; but I do not know what."

Jean-Nicolas said nothing. The scent of the hay was sweet and suffocating, and through it he could smell the acidity of Milliquet's unhealthy body and unwashed feet.

Milliquet spoke again. Jean-Nicolas could hear a tiny, hysterical voice within the man suddenly struggling to escape. "What is it? What is it? There is blackness in me, nothing but blackness. . . ."

Jean-Nicolas, shy, disturbed, said nothing; and a little later, half asleep, he heard Milliquet rise with a sigh and tiptoe across the hay-matted floor and slowly down the stairway. It was late afternoon; everyone was fast asleep; and the scent of the stable hung over them like a blanket.

Jean-Nicolas dimly heard the sound of Milliquet making water below; suddenly he fell into a dreamless sleep.

But a little later he woke up again: sleep was curiously difficult.

He slipped on his shoes and crept down the stairs. He cautiously opened the stable door several inches and peered into the hot evening sunlight. Three cows were grazing in front of the stable. There was something reassuring in their lazy presence and their clean, bucolic scent mingling with the scent of the pines and the smell of the stable. He could hear the rhythmical sound of their grazing and the sound of their breath among the grasses. He could see a thin strip of woods through the door, and after the darkness of the stable the daylight glittered

wildly. The woods were alive and swarming with light; the trunks were streaming with golden dusk-light and a filtering fringe of gold hung from the boughs, immobile as metal. The air was quivering with butterflies—sulphur butterflies, peacock butterflies, tortoise-shell butterflies. A dragonfly hung gleaming from the stable wall like a piece of mica. Birds were twittering feverishly in the small trees and everything was swept along in the senseless buzzing and chirping and simmering of early dusk.

How strange it was, thought Jean-Nicolas, full of a desolate uneasiness; and how curiously all values had altered in the course of a single night. Night was now the time of labour, security, illumination; the scent of night had grown protective. And it was the glitter of day which carried fever: day was the time of secrecy and foreboding.

He was about to step out of doors; he hesitated. Then he saw, crossing the field to the east and directly below him, two middle-aged men in *bérets* with rifles swung over their shoulders. He saw only their backs; they were walking intently toward the Bonneville highway, and their path led straight from the hillock beside the stable.

The light of the evening assumed a strange, ferocious quality.

Jean-Nicolas stepped back and closed the door softly. He saw the dusty coach gleaming dimly on the left. On the right, beneath the stairway, he caught sight of an old cupboard, grey with dust, and on the floor beside it a heap of dusty red mattresses. Everything gently creaked and tinkled and rattled; a fringe of dust fell slowly from a rafter. A smell of mingled urine and ammonia, stale with the months, swam forth from a *pot-de-chambre* which stood on a small brass table.

Then he smelled something else, a kind of human sediment, unpleasant and faintly like the scent of a butcher's shop.

He stumbled over a rake, which leapt up and slapped

him in the thigh. He leaned against the cupboard to steady himself, and he reached out mechanically to pick up the rake and place it noiselessly against the wall.

At that moment he heard Quivar's purring voice fall through the dust: "What is happening, monsieur?"

He looked up. Quivar was standing at the top of the stairway. His huge black torso was glittering with sweat, and as Jean-Nicolas looked he saw Quivar's eyes stare at him and past him toward the wall behind him, with a kind of mute and terrifying caress.

He repeated softly: "What has happened, monsieur?"

Jean-Nicolas turned round, and there he saw, half lying on the floor and half leaning against the wall, with one arm hanging limply over a large earthenware jug, wildly awkward, the shape of Milliquet. His head hung loosely over his chest; the shirt and trousers were torn open; a red stain shone under his belly, and from this a thin dark line ran winding across the floor.

Quivar looked at Jean-Nicolas with his black, tremendous eyes and crept softly down the stairs. He put his hand on Jean-Nicolas' shoulder and whispered: "We shall leave now, you and I. The time has come. Let us go, monsieur."

Then he took Jean-Nicolas by the arm and slowly opened the stable door. They picked up their knapsacks and Quivar took his gun; and together they stepped into the widening dusk.

THE SECOND NIGHT

Chapter Thirteen

"TELL me, monsieur," said Quivar at last, as they climbed through the thicket toward the top of the hill, "what is it that happened back there?"

"I do not know, Quivar."

"I see. I see, monsieur," said Quivar, curiously gentle, and fell silent.

The sun was setting swiftly and from the top of the hill through the birches they saw the last brief glitter which, just before vanishing, shot blazing wildly along the crest of the Chaine du Réposoir.

They were careful to remain among the shadows and progress was slow through the thicket, but then when the light grew pearly they could walk more quickly. There was no path that Jean-Nicolas could see. They halted and looked at his map. "There," said Quivar, pointing with his long black finger. "That's where we go." It was a narrow stretch between the town of Bonneville and the Pointe d'Andey, leaving St. Pierre de Rumilly slightly to the west.

"Are you hungry?" said Quivar.

Jean-Nicolas shrugged his shoulders, and Quivar said: "Let us sit down a moment." They laid down their knapsacks and Jean-Nicolas opened his own and broke a bar of chocolate in two, giving half to Quivar. They munched silently and then Quivar took out his cigarettes. There were four left. He gave one to Jean-Nicolas and lit it for him, but shook his head when Jean-Nicolas passed it back to him after several puffs. "A last puff before you throw it away," he said; "that's all I want. Life is long, monsieur." He smiled at Jean-Nicolas with a slow, searching tenderness.

"And now tell me, monsieur," he said. "What really happened back there?" His voice was pressing and

intimate; there was a remorseless cunning in his eyes.

"I told you the truth, Quivar."

Quivar replied with deliberation: "Very well, monsieur. I believe you. You know nothing. Nothing at all."

Jean-Nicolas tried to detect a note of irony in his voice; there was none.

"Was he dead, Quivar?"

Quivar glanced swiftly at Jean-Nicolas and turned his great black head away again. He shrugged his shoulders a little. "Yes. Of course," he replied. "As dead as a snared rabbit."

"I do not understand it, Quivar," said Jean-Nicolas after a pause.

Quivar reached and took the glowing cigarette and puffed at it deeply, twice, and flicked it over the rock.

"Much happens," whispered Quivar, "in this war that remains a mystery. . . . A man has been killed. You know nothing. I know nothing. It remains a mystery."

Jean-Nicolas grew thoughtful. "And yet," he said presently, "I can't help feeling sorry for poor Milliquet."

"He was typical," sighed Quivar. "One of thousands, monsieur."

"I think he knew he was going to die," said Jean-Nicolas softly.

"They always know, monsieur."

"He wasn't really a villain, Quivar. He was merely weak and without conviction."

"The world nowadays," said Quivar, in a strange deep murmur, "destroys all such weak ones, monsieur. . . . All such weak ones meet with a violent end nowadays."

"You hated him, didn't you, Quivar? Why did you hate him?"

"I knew more about him than you know, monsieur."

"Had you met him before, Quivar?"

"Some day, perhaps, I shall tell you a tale, monsieur," whispered Quivar.

"Was he a traitor, Quivar? Was it he who . . .?" Jean-Nicolas hesitated.

But Quivar only smiled at him with his black, tender, incomprehensible smile.

Jean-Nicolas then told him of the two men in blue *bérets* whom he had seen crossing the field.

But Quivar merely stared at the ground and did not appear to listen. "And now let us go," he murmured and rose.

The trees grew steadily taller and thicker, and the ground ran black and level along the foot of the hill. This was by far the largest stretch of wood they had come to; the trees were vigorous, thick-bodied pines, and they could see far down the long aisles of trunks.

The sound of their footsteps was crisp and resilient on the pine needles. It was almost dark now; a calm, protective resonance filled the forest.

"The other three," Jean-Nicolas said presently, "Amedée and the lawyer and little Ulysse. What about them?"

"They go their way," said Quivar. "We go ours. Danger is danger."

"They'll find their way?"

"They'll find a way, monsieur."

"Why did you insist on leaving them, Quivar?"

The negro looked at him gently, with a kind of mute plea. "It was necessary, monsieur."

"Perhaps," said Jean-Nicolas, watching Quivar closely, "it was one of them who did it?"

Quivar merely shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? . . . You know nothing. I know nothing. Let it remain a mystery, monsieur."

It was strangely pleasant to walk beside Quivar. He was the most elusive character Jean-Nicolas had ever encountered. His mind and heart were a paradox:

absolutely primitive yet infinitely subtle. His body was powerful and gentle and calm. His voice was soft and deep, like a great cat purring. A pleasant aroma, vaguely like nutmeg, emanated from his chest, which shone like iron in the dusky light. But all this was only the surface of the man. Below lay the jungle.

The darkness grew and they walked more slowly. The night air took on a moist, rooty flavour; the insistent scent of pines grew oppressive.

"Listen!" said Quivar.

Jean-Nicolas listened.

"I hear nothing," he said.

"Your eyes are skilful," observed Quivar with indulgence. "And your nose is skilful, monsieur. But your ears, I see, are not very skilful."

"I hear a vague sound of insects chirping," said Jean-Nicolas, listening intently.

"Big insects," said Quivar softly. "Insects with guns, perhaps."

They walked on. The forest was breathless, filled with secret animation.

The only sound Jean-Nicolas could hear was a rustle far away; the crackle of dry twigs loosened high in the pines and falling pulverously, like phantoms, from limb to limb to the ground.

"I hear nothing but a rustling of twigs," he said.

"Not only twigs, monsieur," said Quivar.

They wandered between the aisles of the pines, looking up at the stars now and then to maintain their direction. Jean-Nicolas was carrying his compass in his hand; but it was too dark to read it without striking a match. Quivar had grown silent and sullen. Jean-Nicolas continued to wonder; conjectures were swarming and multiplying in his mind; each more subtle than the one before, until his mind grew lost in a vapour of paradoxes.

Quivar suddenly came to a halt and began to sniff at the air.

"You have the sensitive nose, monsieur," he whispered. "Do you smell something?"

A wonderful fragrance was trickling through the air.

"Something good," ventured Jean-Nicolas.

"A good *pot-au-feu*," whispered Quivar with pleasure, "is worth risking one's neck these days, monsieur."

A faint orange glow was emerging from a cavity among the pines.

As they drew nearer the trees parted and the glow grew bright and dancing. They came to a halt; they watched and listened. The firelight was dancing dimly on the pine trunks and there was the delicious scent of something being fried, and the hiss of the fire and the frying; and then, strangest of all, the sound of a woman softly singing.

Quivar and Jean-Nicolas stepped stealthily closer.

It was a small clearing flanked by enormous pines. In the centre of the clearing a fire was smouldering, half concealed by an improvised structure of rocks. A stout elderly woman, with black hair streaked with grey, was crouching beside the fire and singing softly. Her dress was black and worn and shabby, and yet in her whole appearance there was a certain tarnished but unconquered elegance. A yellow handkerchief was tied around her head; silver earrings hung from her ears. Her skin was dark. She was stirring something in a copper pot, and as Jean-Nicolas watched from behind the trees he saw her reach into her dress and take out a salt-cellar, shake it vigorously into the pot, then screw it shut again and slip it back into her bosom.

A boy of seventeen or so lay near by, watching the woman at the fire; he was lying flat on his stomach, his arms folded on the ground and his chin resting on his arms. Near him sat a girl two or three years older, sullenly staring into the embers. Somewhat further away, under a tree, lay a white-haired man asleep.

The old woman stopped singing. "Where is Giulio?" she said in Italian.

Nobody replied for a moment; then the boy yawned lazily and said: "Fetching firewood."

"You, too," said the woman tenderly, "you should be fetching wood, Sebastiano."

The boy kept gazing dreamily at the pot steaming over the embers and then laid his head sideways on his brown arms and closed his eyes.

"Are you hungry, my Sebastiano?"

"Sebastiano is always hungry," said the girl in a low and sullen, extremely beautiful voice. "Sebastiano is a camel."

"Camels are never hungry," corrected the boy, his eyes still closed; it was easy to see they were brother and sister. "Camels are thirsty."

"A crocodile, then," said the girl.

"Susanna," said the woman gently, and leaned over and tasted the liquid in the pot with a wooden spoon, and then sprinkled some more salt. "A bit of wood for the fire."

The girl rose mechanically and picked up two or three dry birch twigs which had been gathered beside the stones, and tossed them listlessly into the fire. She wore a bright red dress; a golden bracelet hung on her wrist. She stood for a moment watching the sparks leap from the new twigs, one hand on her hip and her young body curving, smooth and slim in silhouette. Then she walked back and sat down again.

Quivar, who had been still as a cat, now walked forward through the trees and stepped casually into the firelight. "Greetings," he said in bad Italian.

The three Italians turned and looked at his great black body in silence.

"We are friends," said Quivar; and he smiled his gradual, enormous smile.

"Greetings then," said the woman gently, with a

curious note of melancholy and exhaustion suddenly in her voice. "There are two of you?" She looked briefly at Quivar and then at Jean-Nicolas; then she looked down, and went on stirring.

Then she turned to the old man and called softly: "Don Giacinto."

The old man did not hear.

"Don Giacinto!" called the boy Sebastiano.

The old man stirred and opened his eyes and sat up. His mind seemed to spring forth from sleep instantaneously; his eyes appraised the newcomers swiftly and calmly, without surprise. Then he said, in the same beautiful voice as the girl's: "Good evening, my friends. Will you join us?"

"We are very hungry," said Quivar simply.

"What we have is yours, stranger. May we invite you," the old man said, with a ceremonious smile in his black eyes, "to be our guests for a light, informal supper?"

"Thank you, signor," said Jean-Nicolas, and Quivar solemnly echoed: "Thank you, signor."

They laid their knapsacks on the ground and came up to the fire, and now Jean-Nicolas could smell the fragrance of onions boiling in the pot. He glanced hungrily over the old woman's shoulder and saw the spaghetti simmering, and slivers of mushrooms and onions floating in a succulent brown sauce.

She was stirring the spaghetti slowly with a wooden spoon, and Jean-Nicolas could see the soft pale threads of spaghetti sliding from the spoon and uncoiling in the crimson aromatic gravy.

Quivar took out his three remaining cigarettes. "Please," he murmured. The three white cigarettes looked very small in his great dark hand.

The old woman smiled at him, a warm and delicate smile, and shook her head.

"Please," said Quivar to the girl. She shook her head too.

Then he passed them to Don Giacinto, who nodded with dignity and took one, and the boy Sebastiano looked at the other two with wide-eyed speculation but shook his head.

Everyone was gazing at the steaming pot of spaghetti, and Jean-Nicolas could hear a delicious dull bubbling in the pot.

The old man reached toward the fire and drew out a burning twig to light his cigarette. He wore a golden ring with a large, circular ruby; the firelight flashed across the gold, it lingered darkly in the glowing ruby.

"Is it almost ready, Donna Raffaelina?"

"It is almost ready, Don Giacinto." Donna Raffaelina raised her head and looked at the old man with a quick secret glance and he nodded to her, a motion playing on his lips which might have been the beginning of a word or a smile.

"Where is Giulio?" said the old man.

"Fetching wood," said Sebastiano.

Don Giacinto's eyes rested on Sebastiano with a curious expression, both playful and melancholy. The old man's face was full of a dusky Mediterranean sadness; his cheeks were webbed with age. He was a suave and beautiful old man, with snowy silky curls rippling over his forehead like fleece.

"Now," said Donna Raffaelina. She nodded to Susanna, who opened a dark canvas bag and brought out a bottle of red wine.

"It is not much," said Donna Raffaelina apologetically. "Only two-thirds of a bottle. And that not of the highest quality."

"Still, a drop drunk in welcome," said Don Giacinto graciously, "is sweet to the wanderer. . . . And now let us eat. Please." He beckoned to Jean-Nicolas and Quivar, and they came up and all sat in a semicircle beside the fire, with the pot of spaghetti poised invitingly in the centre.

"And Giulio?" said the girl.

"We shall save some for Giulio," said Don Giacinto. He sighed irritably. "Giulio is unpredictable. Giulio is in a mood again, I suppose," and he glanced slyly at Susanna.

"No formalities, please," he added, and Donna Raffaelina placed a fork in the pot. She passed it to Jean-Nicolas with a grave, hospitable nod.

Chapter. Fourteen

"We started from Torino," Don Giacinto was saying, "on a cold windy night. We had planned to go to Aosta . . ."

"But a traveller then informed us that there was still snow in Aosta," put in Donna Raffaelina, "and the way was not worth trying."

"So we turned to the west on the highway to Rivoli," said Don Giacinto, his lips still wet with wine.

"We desired to reach Switzerland as quickly as possible," explained Donna Raffaelina. "But the roads to the north were blocked with snow and impassable."

"That is why we went into France," nodded Don Giacinto. "Up through Modane and Albertville was the only way. That is why we are here. And even that way was difficult and cold after we left Torino."

"Yes, and there was a wet wind blowing—you remember how it chilled us to the bones, Don Giacinto?"

"There was a man named Cesare Picotti who drove us in his truck to Bussoleno," Don Giacinto continued. "But outside Bussoleno, where the road passed through a stretch of wood, a band of *guerriglieri* stopped us and searched the truck. You remember what they found, Donna Raffaelina?"

"Seventy quintals of cheese, my dear."

"And fifty blankets, and other things as well," said

Don Giacinto, "intended for the barracks at Susa. We knew nothing about this lamentable and unpatriotic business of the cheese and the blankets, naturally. We explained this politely to the *guerriglieri*."

"They were nice men," said Sebastiano in his hoarse young voice.

"With soup stains in their beards," said Susanna, "and smelling of shrimps."

"A state of siege," said Don Giacinto, "had just been proclaimed in Stradella and Lecco and Emilia and Ferrara, not to mention Gorizia and Como and all that part of the country, all because of the partisans. But it was a pleasant surprise to find them active even west of Torino."

"It was a pleasant surprise, too," Donna Raffaelina put in gently, "to find them guided by a sense of justice and decorum."

"We were fortunate," said Don Giacinto, "in meeting such a relatively decorous *squadra*. The leader of the *squadra* even gave us a small gorgonzola after we had outlined our political sentiments—you recall, my dear?"

"I do indeed," said Donna Raffaelina. "He was a member of the old school, and a credit to Italy. He even quoted a line of Tasso."

"Italy needs more such men as the leader of that particular *squadra*," said the old man with a sigh. "His name was Orselli. He was a fine specimen, combining virility with an inner delicacy. . . . Tell me quite frankly, my friend, since we are on the subject," he said, turning to Jean-Nicolas, "what are your feelings toward Italy? Great bitterness, I suppose?"

"We have no conspicuous feelings about Italy," replied Jean-Nicolas. "Not any longer. Such feelings fall away when one faces graver dangers."

"I understand," said the old man, nodding sadly:

At this moment a man in brown corduroys came

through the pines toward the dying fire, his right arm loaded with kindling wood: he had no left arm.

"You have been a long time, Giulio," observed Donna Raffaelina gently. "Sit down with us. These are friends who have joined us."

Giulio placed the wood on the ground near the fire and turned to look at Jean-Nicolas and Quivar.

He was a man in his early thirties, but gave an impression of agelessness. He had lost his left eye as well as his left arm. He turned his right ear when someone spoke; he was obviously deaf in his left ear. Only the right half of his body still seemed to operate: the left half was an appendage, a ruin. And this gave to his right half a double intensity; his right eye glittered and pierced and glared. This startling asymmetry made it somehow difficult to tell what manner of man he really was. He wore a faded brown shirt and brown corduroys and black gym shoes; they had taken on a wrinkled, weather-beaten texture; they clung to his lean body like lettuce to a stalk.

Donna Raffaelina passed him what was left in the pot of spaghetti and then the wine bottle. "You will forgive us, Giulio," she said apologetically. "We were hungry. We had hungry guests."

Giulio said nothing and began to eat.

Quivar reached into his trouser pocket and offered the two remaining cigarettes to Giulio, who peered at him with sudden curiosity in his one eye. He took a cigarette and placed it carefully on the ground beside him with a sullen nod, and then raised the wine bottle to his lips.

"What happened," said Quivar in his deep, vibrant voice, "after you left Bussoleno?" They were speaking Italian, but Quivar spoke his own impromptu mingling of French and Italian.

"We walked on to Susa," said Don Giacinto, "and there we came upon Giulio, who was riding along on a donkey in the early morning. Weren't you, Giulio?"

Giulio turned his right side to Don Giacinto; he glowered and nodded and went on eating.

"Giulio was a stranger to us at that time," Don Giacinto continued. "But he was a friend in need and he tactfully persuaded Donna Raffaelina to ride the donkey all the way into Chiamonte, where we had a horrible breakfast. I suppose you recall that breakfast, Donna Raffaelina?"

She nodded deploringly.

In some ways," said Don Giacinto, musing, "Giulio is still a stranger to us. . . . Giulio is a man of few words."

Susanna glanced swiftly and searchingly at Giulio, who had lit his cigarette and was smoking, sitting at a small distance from the rest of the group, on a black stone; and the boy Sebastiano had placed his head sideways on his elbow and closed his eyes.

"At any rate," Don Giacinto went on, "we soon reached Oulx. There, in the public square of Oulx, we saw a man hanging from a tree. I have no idea why, to this day: he was quite an old man, thin and bearded. I mention this merely as a detail. Italy has become a land of unexpected violence. Well, we continued on to Bardonecchia, where the donkey unexpectedly collapsed; so that Donna Raffaelina was forced to continue on foot. It was on foot that she crossed the frontier. In Modane," he added thoughtfully, "we went to church and drank the healing waters. . . ."

"And then?" said Quivar. "After Modane?"

"After Modane we wandered north over the open hills to Albertville and Ugines."

"And now?" Quivar murmured. "Where are you going now?"

"To Geneva," said the old man, in a tone half stately, half apologetic. "We have cousins in Geneva. . . . Ours is an old, eccentric, rambling Sicilian family, signor. Once we knew great wealth and splendour. Once, signor, we possessed a fifth of the entire island: twenty generations

ago. But fortunes vary: customs deteriorate. We've wandered the whole length of Italy, looking for hospitality. Our family has fallen into bits; they have sold their souls to the Fascisti and have expelled us, who have retained nothing but our pride. . . . And now we are on our final journey, signor."

"We also," said Quivar. "We also, signor."

"I am told that certain Swiss lakes are distinctly worth a visit," said the old man. He smiled coyly. "But mediocre architecture. No cultural monuments."

"Don Giacinto," murmured the woman reproachfully. Then she sighed and added: "Cultural monuments. What are they? What good are they doing Italy? Are they giving us bread? Are they giving us milk, Don Giacinto?"

They grew silent. The only animation was the slow and roving glitter of the fire: it danced on Don Giacinto's ruby ring; it hung, like a drop of blood, in Giulio's eye; it caressed Sebastiano's black spaniel curls; it sparkled lightly on Donna Raffaelina's earrings; it played on Susanna's golden bracelet and among the folds of her bright red dress; it played on Quivar's naked chest, drawing a lace of shadows under the wiry black hairs.

"Tell me, my friends," said Don Giacinto with sudden gravity: "what will happen to Italy? Italy stands alone. Italy has been stripped of so much, so much. We give nothing," he said despondently, "and we receive nothing. We have nothing to gain, and little left to lose. The French despise us. The English resent us. The Germans detest us. That last is, of course, a detail of no serious relevance. What is more, my friends, even the Serbs and the Croats, and naturally the Abyssinians and I suppose even the Arabs and perhaps even the Hottentots, feel a certain fashionable contempt for us—if they bother to think of us at all."

"There are some," said Donna Raffaelina, "who will surely not entirely forget us Italians. There are some

who will not forget the Italian landscape and the Italian music and the Italian lightness of heart."

"So one hopes." Don Giacinto sighed. "One can be sure of nothing. The memory of men is very short nowadays. And, my friends, this is only a small part of what the Fascisti have done to us. The worst is this: What they have done to our own people. To the soul of our people."

"They have not touched," said Donna Raffaelina serenely, "the soul of the Italian people. That you know quite well, Don Giacinto."

"Let us not say soul, then. Let us say: self-respect."

"The Italian people," said Donna Raffaelina, "have a sense of humour, and a sense of detachment, and a sense of time passing and everything changing and yet not changing. They are realists. They will recover. They will recover and be stripped of that horrible vanity and vulgarity, and it will be like breathing fresh Italian air again, Don Giacinto. For that day I am waiting; and, of course, for the punishments."

"And for the punishments," repeated Don Giacinto, nodding gravely. He turned to Quivar. "Where were you born, my friend?"

"In Martinique," said Quivar.

"You love Martinique?"

"I do not remember Martinique," said Quivar.

"Where did you spend your youth?"

"In France," said Quivar.

"Then you love France?"

"No," said Quivar. "Why should I love France?"

"Which country, then," said Don Giacinto with patience, "do you love?"

"None," said Quivar, imperturbable. "I love none, I hate none."

Don Giacinto shook his head. "Either you are very wise, my friend, or very bitter."

Jean-Nicolas had been watching the girl. She was

sitting sullen and preoccupied, playing with the links of her golden bracelet and gazing at the embers, which hung reflected in her great black eyes. She was nineteen perhaps; or younger, probably younger than she looked. Her hair was dark but shone with an exquisite copper glitter in the dimming light; it was parted on the left side and drawn over her ears and bound into a knot low on the back of her neck. There was a liquid simplicity in the way the hair rose and fell; it combined with the brown, unimpassioned delicacy of her features to give her a look of timelessness, of a Tanagra figurine. Her eyes were large, dark and impersonal. Her chin was gently curved but determined; her neck was strong and slender and resilient. Jean-Nicolas gazed at her for a long time: he could see that she was clear and cool and unexplored; and yet in her full lips and the sullen, disdainful scrutiny of her glance, and in her warm slow gestures, he could see something hidden, expectant. She was too young and too hostile to be wholly beautiful; she was frowning at the embers and lost in her own thoughts; and for Jean-Nicolas the night was touched with magic. He heard Don Giacinto's beautiful Tuscan voice move through the stillness of the pines, and he felt a strange forgetful happiness come over him.

Chapter Fifteen

"SUSANNA," said Don Giacinto tenderly, "come and sit by my side. Speak to me, Susanna. Speak to your father who loves you more than he should."

Susanna came up and sat by Don Giacinto's side and leaned her head against his side and closed her eyes. He placed his arms around the curve of her head and his brown withered fingers moved through the copper glitter of her hair.

"You never confide in me nowadays, Susanna," he

murmured in mellow, reproachful tones. "Tell me, Susanna, do you still love your father?"

"I still love you, Don Giacinto," she replied in a low, monotonous tone, full of shyness but with a hushed and passionate sincerity.

It seemed odd to Jean-Nicolas how in this family the children addressed the parents and the parents addressed one another by their formal titles; and yet an atmosphere of deep, wordless understanding hung over all four.

"Tell me, my daughter," Don Giacinto continued; he had drunk too much, or perhaps he was weary; his voice was soft and wandering: "You make a secret of your heart nowadays. Tell me, my daughter, have you ever been in love?"

"Never."

"Not with anyone?"

"Never, Don Giacinto."

Don Giacinto sighed. "You insist on making your heart a mystery to me, my daughter."

"I shall never," murmured Susanna, "fall in love with a stranger. Not for pleasure and not for money and not for anything there is."

"You are a dutiful daughter, Susanna," said Don Giacinto with a deep sigh. "Dutiful but hard."

"And you, Don Giacinto, are a wicked, wayward man," said Donna Raffaelina playfully, and yet with something like despair concealed in her voice. "You talk and talk and talk. And your talk is a perpetual insinuation."

Quivar and Jean-Nicolas were lying on their backs beside the dying embers, happy with the delicious warmth of the spaghetti and the red wine in their stomachs. The negro's great body was lying motionless, but Jean-Nicolas could see the pulse of his blood throb under the black skin. He was watching the tree-tops and listening, lips parted. They listened to the talk of the Italian family as though it were music, delicately har-

monized, impersonal. Only the voice of Susanna emerged from the rest and thrilled Jean-Nicolas each time he heard it. The sullen, lurking, defiant embrace in her voice was something he had never heard, and each time he heard it he longed to reach out and touch her.

"When a man's body," said Don Giacinto disconsolately, after a moment's meditation, "is too old to bring pleasure to himself and to women, then he must fall back on insinuations, my dear Raffaelina."

"And still," moaned Donna Raffaelina gently, "I do not understand it. It is not true of other old men. Oh, why are you so haunted by bodily love? Why, Don Giacinto?"

"Because," said Don Giacinto, with a wry little smile and a glance at Susanna's copper-glittering hair; "because I am so full of memories, my dear. They keep welling up. They keep overflowing as my body keeps shrinking."

Donna Raffaelina was placing the pot and the dry spaghetti and the fork and spoon in a small black bag. The spices she rolled in small brown papers and placed inside the bosom of her dress, together with the salt-cellar. Now the fire was all ashes. Quivar had risen; Jean-Nicolas rose too. "It is ten o'clock," he said. "We must be on our way, my friend and I."

"We go likewise," said Don Giacinto with tranquillity.

"Where?"

"Over the hills," the old man replied, and cocked his thumb vaguely toward the north-west.

"With us, signor," said Jean-Nicolas with regret, "it is a matter of walking all night."

"And with us likewise, my friend," stated the old man with pride. "She is a strong woman," nodding to his wife, "and a healthy girl with a boy's legs," he said, looking down at Susanna. "They walk and walk. They never tire."

They rose and took their knapsacks, and Giulio lifted the black handbag and ran a strap through the handle and

over his shoulders. Without a word they crossed the clearing and entered the pines, following Quivar.

They kept along the crest of the hill, keeping the giant shadow of the Chaine du Réposoir steadily on their right. Now the ground was sloping downhill again toward the river Borne. The pines were giving way to the oaks and birches; the contours of the forest lost their monotony; the roof of leaves grew more intermittent, and through it they could see the lyrical pattern of the stars. A strange sense of security filled them and they knew that, whatever happened, they would not lose their way.

Quivar continued to lead the way and he was followed by Giulio. Jean-Nicolas fell back and found himself walking at Susanna's side. She looked at him with a shadow of a smile, but her manner remained careless and aloof.

"Are you tired, signorina?" Jean-Nicolas said at last.

"You need not," she said coolly, "try to make conversation, signor."

"You prefer, then, not to talk?"

"Not," she replied sternly, "about trivialities. Not about the usual nonsense. Not about poetry or films or romance."

"Such things have no interest for you, signorina?"

"Such things are for children and maiden aunts."

"What interests you, then?"

"Real things. History. Philosophy. Not," she said with disdain, "all this fantasy about love."

Jean-Nicolas grew silent, with a strange inner smile.

Soon she said, with a note of lenience: "What is your name, signor?"

"Jean-Nicolas."

"And your surname?"

"Martin."

"You are French?"

"Half French."

"Explain, please," commanded Susanna. "Why half?"

"I was born in Egypt," said Jean-Nicolas obediently. "I had an American father and a French mother."

"I see," said Susanna, with a tactful hush in her voice. "And then?"

"Then my father, who had worked for an American shipping firm, died while we lived in Alexandria and we went to Geneva: but perhaps such details are of no interest to you?"

"All real things interest me," said Susanna sweepingly, her cool voice wandering through the darkness, her head shining like a great plum in the starlight. "Continue, signor."

"We lived in Geneva for four years. Each Easter we went to Cologne to visit a German grandmother, and each summer we spent in Ferney, and each winter my mother sent me down to St. Pierre de Rumilly to school. I had an aunt who lived in St. Pierre de Rumilly."

"And after that, signor?"

"After that, signorina," said Jean-Nicolas, "I visited America. I lived at my father's home in Connecticut; I lived there two whole summers."

"I see," she said. He felt her slowly softening and warming at his side as they wandered through the birches; and he could hardly bear not to reach out and touch her.

"And you?" said Jean-Nicolas.

She glanced at him quickly.

"Where have you lived, signorina?"

"In Messina," she said, "till I was twelve. Then we moved to Palermo. And during these last five years we have wandered from city to city. . . . From Palermo to Naples. From Naples to Frascati. From Frascati to Brescia. From Brescia to Torino. . . ."

They walked on silently, their thoughts weaving a secret, speculative pattern.

"Is Giulio a friend of yours?" said Jean-Nicolas.

"I don't know what you mean, exactly," she retorted, "but in any case, Giulio is an evil man, signor."

"Evil?" Jean-Nicolas was surprised. "Why do you say that? To me Giulio seems like a worthy man, and unfortunate."

"I know better," she said knowingly. "Misfortune has filled him with dark, peculiar miseries. He is a twisted man, signor."

"A twisted man," said Jean-Nicolas thoughtfully, "is better than a false man or an empty man."

Ske glanced at him with severity. "Now you are speaking philosophy. Are you trying to impress me?"

"Why should I wish to impress you?"

"Forgive me," she said after a moment, in a more conciliatory tone; "I did not wish to sound rude." He could see her cool, boyish eyes look at him with a lingering scrutiny. "Now we can be friends, perhaps. You may call me Susanna. On one condition."

"Yes?"

"Please, signor, don't ever try to flirt with me. I detest all types of flirting. And above all . . ." She hesitated.

"Yes, Susanna?"

"Don't ever try to kiss me," she said, suddenly shy: her fingers played among the golden links of her bracelet.

"I promise," said Jean-Nicolas in a solemn voice, his heart leaping curiously.

She seemed content. "Then," she murmured, "we can be friends, signor."

"Why do you keep on calling me 'signor'?" inquired Jean-Nicolas presently.

"Because you are still a stranger to me, signor."

"A stranger?"

"It is not that you are a strange person, you understand," said Susanna reassuringly. "It is merely that you come from a distant country. And your name is a strange and complicated one."

They had been following Quivar through the oaks and birches, and now they came to a bridge. It was a small

stone bridge overgrown with moss and lichen, and it led from nowhere to nowhere. There was no road, not even a path leading over it or toward it from either side. It was merely a bridge crossing a forest stream, sequestered, self-sufficient; no one had used it for many years. When they crossed it the moss under their feet was soft and springy, and a cool exhalation rose from the singing water.

Two benches had been built in the two stone railings of the bridge, and these benches were likewise cushioned with moss. The moon, somewhat smaller than the night before, was gliding forth behind the oaks.

"What time is it?" inquired Don Giacinto.

Quivar struck a match and looked at his watch. "Quarter to midnight."

"Quarter to noon for us," said Donna Raffaelina. "For us night is day."

"Let us rest," said Don Giacinto. He had been conversing in low tones with Sebastiano. "Have we any coffee left, Donna Raffaelina?"

"A little," confessed Donna Raffaelina, who was leaning against the bridge and breathing heavily. "Thirty grammes or so."

"It is coffee from before the war," declared Don Giacinto with pride. "Very well, Donna Raffaelina, let us have a bit of coffee. Are you tired, my dear? Sit down and let us rest."

They sat down on the mossy railing; and Susanna leaned over and gazed, with strange intentness, at the sparkling water.

Chapter Sixteen

SEBASTIANO climbed down to the edge of the stream and washed the copper pot and filled it half full of water, and then brought it back to Donna Raffaelina. Giulio had

begun to build a fire and was crouching at the foot of the bridge, blowing at the flame.

Donna Raffaelina, sitting near by, again drew forth a small parcel from the large black bosom of her dress: a bag of red waxed paper, folded over several times. She unfolded it and opened it, and sniffed: "Coffee," she murmured with feeling. "The smell of real coffee."

"There is nothing like coffee," murmured Quivar with a dark purr. "Not even wine. Not even absinthe."

"Not even love, sometimes," said Don Giacinto cuttingly.

"Don Giacinto," pleaded the old woman. "A truly chaste remark from you is as rare as an icicle in August."

Donna Raffaelina, squatting beside the fire, had emptied the ground coffee into the copper pot and was stirring the water, which had begun to steam: Jean-Nicolas could see the steam, tinged by firelight, floating past like a veil.

"It is cruel," she sighed, "to make coffee in this manner."

"It is a real treat, all the same," said Quivar, sniffing the fragrance. "A real celebration."

"We must celebrate something special," said Sebastiano. "Something to give us cheer."

"What is there to give us cheer?" said Giulio in lugubrious tones. "It is the darkest of times. Europe is clouded in misery."

"Please, Giulio," said Donna Raffaelina, "contain yourself. Well, what shall we celebrate?"

"The mysterious and somewhat poetical fact," suggested the old man, "that we are still alive."

"That would be a selfish and ironical thing to celebrate. No," said Donna Raffaelina. "What do you suggest, Giulio? Try again."

"Let us celebrate, then," said Giulio, "the assumption that since things are at their worst in all ways, they are bound to improve. Does that seem cheerful enough?"

"Cheerful perhaps," replied Donna Raffaelina, "but tedious and inelegant, I am sorry to say, Giulio. Suggest something, stranger," she said, turning to Jean-Nicolas. "What shall we celebrate?"

"It is not for me to say," said Jean-Nicolas politely. "You who provided the coffee: it is you who must say."

"Well, the coffee is almost ready," said Donna Raffaelina. "Bring the cup, please, Susanna. And the spoon."

The fire was sparkling at the foot of the bridge, and the glow played on the mossy walls and drew bright, sinuous threads along the water. The flames lit on their faces and brought a sudden animation into their eyes.

"Very well," said Donna Raffaelina, holding a cloth below the snout of the gleaming copper pot to catch the grinds. "It is ready." She poured the coffee into the little blue cup which Susanna was holding.

"You shall drink the first cup, Donna Raffaelina," said the old man, with a courtly formality, "since you have the sturdiest heart of all. And, since there is nothing else left to celebrate, let us celebrate the love of man for man, even in this darkest of times, my dear!"

Donna Raffaelina silently raised the little blue cup to her lips and drank, and returned the cup to Susanna, who filled the cup and passed it in turn to Don Giacinto and Jean-Nicolas and Quivar. There was a look of strange joy in Donna Raffaelina's face, so restrained and yet so sharp that it seemed to border on grief.

Quivar's hot ebony face was alive with joy too, but a very different kind of joy. It was the passive, enveloping joy of a wild animal at rest.

They all sat on the mossy walls of the bridge and watched the firelight leaping and gliding down the stream. All things, the stone, the mortar, the moss, the mosslike watercress and the smooth black water, all acquired a fine and mysteriously breathing texture beneath the flicker of the firelight.

"God," said Giulio suddenly, "has forgotten us Italians, I think."

"God," said Don Giacinto sternly, "still loves the Italians, Giulio. Of that I am sure. Needless to say, they have their little failings, as God Himself is quite aware. But all the same," said the old man, his snowy hair shining brightly on his withered brown forehead, "I can't help feeling that He still has a soft spot in His heart for us Italians."

"God has been cruel to us," said Giulio, his one eye sharply gleaming.

"Not cruel, Giulio. Patient, observant, a trifle depressed now and then. But cruel, never."

"Why then, Don Giacinto, has He allowed so much blindness and betrayal and suffering, distributed apparently without rhyme or reason?"

Donna Raffaelina had been listening with closed eyes, her arms folded over her great black bosom. Now she sighed and said: "Well, I am a simple, uneducated woman. I have never read books of philosophy. I have never read a word of Greek or Latin. My mother read a few lines of Dante to me one day, but, frankly, I can hardly pretend to be well-informed on cultural matters. And I too am puzzled, Don Giacinto. Life has become a kind of cave, so unfathomable, so utterly dark—no, not only the war; many things; things less evident to the eye—tell me, Don Giacinto, is there any reason for this misery?"

She continued with her eyes still closed, the soft low rhythm of her voice touched by the rustle of the trees and the water. The fire was dying again. The moon was still shining above the mountains, three-quarters full.

Quivar was listening with great care, his eyes slowly filling with melancholy. He was holding the empty blue cup between his two great hands, like a squirrel holding a nut, and now and then raised it to sniff the lingering scent of coffee.

"Is the reason for this darkness, Don Giacinto, to be found in the errors and emptiness of our own spirits? Or are we, good and bad alike, as helpless as leaves in a storm? And do the reasons lie remote from us all, in the inscrutable heavings of nature or in the madness of the stars? I ask myself this question again and again. Truly I do."

"The reasons, my dear," replied Don Giacinto, "lie in our own spirits, however hidden. Of that I am sure. Not in any single spirit but in the spirit which all of us together have woven about us so blindly, like a tapestry. And the single man, Donna Raffaelina, is only a tiny part of this terrible tapestry which has wandered into shapes beyond his control. Our lives have moved too swiftly, my dear, our spirits are fluttering too far behind. The wise men have deserted us, Donna Raffaelina. The great men have rotted away. Why deny it? Wisdom rots, flesh rots, even hope and understanding rot slowly away . . ."

"Even love," said Giulio quickly, "can rot away inside a man."

And he looked at Don Giacinto with a strange intensity. Quivar also was gazing mystified at Don Giacinto. They were all watching Don Giacinto. He had a dreamy, casual, inexhaustible magnetism, which never dried away in him because the passion in him stayed as fresh as a boy's. Everyone, as Jean-Nicolas could see, had fallen somewhat in love with him. Not only because of his old man's beauty or his vigour or his wicked charm; rather because the very essence of his character was longing, and this longing was so deep and so enveloping that whatever he contemplated—a phrase, a face, an animal, or a memory—it stirred the contagious longing in him and a longing in the others replied: but in him it was the unfulfillable longing for a thing that was flowing away from him like water; and in the rest it was the unfulfillable longing to touch that buried treasure that lay glowing inside him.

Quivar had fallen into deep meditation. It fascinated Jean-Nicolas to see Quivar lost in his own thoughts. Thoughts, Jean-Nicolas felt sure, that were never in terms of words or reason but only dim, prehistoric shadows.

Susanna took the empty copper pot and the little blue cup and took them down to the stream to rinse them. Jean-Nicolas followed her down to the water, and there she stood still and pointed at the moon, which hung frozen behind the summit of a pine tree.

"It's the right time for fortune-telling," she observed.

"Why, Susanna?"

"When the moon," she explained, "is exactly like that. Here, give me your hand, signor. I shall read your fortune for you."

They sat down beside the water, with the water shimmering just beneath their finger-tips. When she took his hand in her warm firm hands it sent a shiver through Jean-Nicolas from head to foot; but he sat attentive and listened. She leaned over and looked closely at his hand, which lay dim in the moonlight. "There," she murmured: "You will live to be sixty-eight. You will have four daughters. You will take a trip to Persia."

She hesitated. "This line is peculiar," she said with disapproval, and ran her warm finger slowly toward Jean-Nicolas' thumb; and it was as though all the sunlight she had absorbed during the day were flowing through her finger-tip into his palm and along his arteries. "You will have a crisis, I suspect," she said. "When you are thirty-nine or forty. . . . How old are you now?"

"Twenty-seven," said Jean-Nicolas.

"Well," she said curtly, "very little of consequence has happened to you so far. You are, I fear, rather immature for twenty-seven. But soon you will have a shock. Some kind of shock. . . ." She looked up into his face. "You believe all of this?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded solemnly.

"Then you are a fool," she said.

"It's all nonsense and lies?"

"Not in the least. It is scrupulously true. But anyone who bothers to look into the future is a fool, so Donna Raffaelina maintains, and I believe her."

"You never look into the future, Susanna? Never?"

She glanced quickly at Jean-Nicolas and drew away her hands. Silently she leaned over the stream and rinsed the pot and the cup, and the water glistened on her hands like a pair of silvery gloves. And again, as she knelt beside the stream and her hand shone above the water, Jean-Nicolas was struck by the classical coolness of her beauty. She moved like a wood goddess. An air of legend lingered about her. She could have been kneeling like that beside the Tiber, or beside the Nile, centuries ago.

She rose and walked back up the slope to the bridge. "Please," she said, when he touched her hand lightly: "I am disappointed in you. You are not what I hoped."

"Why, Susanna?" Jean-Nicolas asked with concern.

"You broke your promise."

"Which promise?"

"About . . ." But she fell silent and a gentle preoccupation shone in her eyes.

She paused beside a tree and looked at the others. They had risen and were watching Quivar point at the stars and then point toward a certain spot in the mountains.

Jean-Nicolas' voice became a flaming, uncontrollable whisper: "May I kiss you, Susanna?"

"No," she said quietly, without surprise, with a kind of earnest sadness, and walked toward the others with the copper pot in one hand and the blue cup in the other.

Chapter Seventeen

Now the ground fell sharply away below them: far below they saw the black water restless in the starlight.

"Another stream," said Don Giacinto with petulance. "The seventh stream in less than three hours." But this one was deep and vehement. It did not ripple but coiled and secretly exulted in the blackness, and far below they could see the wild green sparkle where it flung itself over the rocks and fell shouting and whining and hissing into the valley.

"Look," said Quivar with a purr of pleasure, "it is not a stream but a torrent!"

They climbed down the steep rocks toward the water. It was slow and dangerous work. Quivar took Donna Raffaelina by the hand and led her step by step to the stony edge. Don Giacinto followed, placing his stiff legs with caution and moaning gently with the effort. Then came the two young ones and then Jean-Nicolas and then Giulio, carrying the bag.

They came and stood at the edge of the stream, some thirty yards above the roar of the plunging water. It was rushing past with great speed and with an ominous stillness.

"It looks perilous," said Don Giacinto, not without awe.

"It is the recent rains and the melting snow," said Quivar, "which have turned this stream into a torrent."

"Must we cross?" said Don Giacinto. "Is there no other way?"

"There is no other way," said Quivar happily.

"There is no bridge?"

"No bridge, signor."

"Perhaps further up," whispered Don Giacinto, "it would be better?"

"There is no further up, signor." Quivar pointed to the walls of rock rising from the water a small distance upstream.

"Or below the waterfall?"

But Quivar had taken off his shoes and now he was stripping his trousers and rolling them in a ball; then he

stepped, black and naked, into the whistling water, which instantly coiled around his ankles in wicked white tongues and then darted sinuously onward. Quivar murmured: "It is a strong current, my friends. It tugs like a great snake."

He was carrying his clothes and two of the knapsacks high over his head and stepped deeper and deeper, till the powerful legs stood like black marble pillars in the stream and the water rose to his thighs in rapid bubbles, and still higher, till his great black chest was lost up to the distended armpits, and the black water and his own blackness joined and grew one. Then the wildness of the stream grew gentle and played around him, and they could see his whole body bracing against the hidden rocks, until he rose once more, step by slow, hidden step, and stood streaming in the shallows of the opposite shore.

He placed the clothes and the knapsacks on a granite rock beside a cedar and then plunged into the stream again, swimming with his head half turned in the water back to the other side. "It tugs, my friends," he whispered, looking at the stream in affectionate awe: "it tugs and coils like a python."

"It looks perilous," moaned Don Giacinto.

"It is perilous," Quivar agreed with relish.

He climbed back on the shore and stood glimmering and panting. "I shall carry the signora," he said. "And then the signor. And then the signorina."

And now he stepped into the water again and planted his feet firmly and bent down beside the rock. "Now, the signora. Astride. Like this." He tapped his shoulders with his two great hands. In silence Donna Raffaelina took off her shoes and stockings and gave them to Sebastiano; then with dignity and calm she raised her skirt to her knees and placed first one knee over Quivar's massive shoulder and then the other.

"Careful," shouted Don Giacinto, in sudden excitement. "Careful, Donna Raffaelina! Be calm, be calm!"

Now Quivar was up to his waist. "I am calm," Donna Raffaelina called back, imperturbable. "Calm as a turtle. It is you who create the indecorous alarm, Don Giacinto!"

"Donna Raffaelina!" shouted the old man, as her bare legs began to trail in the water. "Is the water cold?"

"Like ice, Don Giacinto!" Her silver earrings glimmered faintly, like drops of water, above the torrent.

"Forgive me my sins, Donna Raffaelina!"

"They are forgiven, Don Giacinto."

And already Quivar was rising and climbing to the opposite shore, like a colossus of black iron, and gently leaned over so that the old woman could step to the rocks.

"You are safe, Donna Raffaelina!" shouted the old man, overcome.

"It is you," she called back briskly, "who are the old woman, Don Giacinto." She sat down on the rock and wiped the water from her feet with the hem of her black skirt.

Then Quivar swam back and carried Don Giacinto across similarly; the old man said not a word but whispered to himself and moaned softly when the cold water came lapping at his toes, and then at last he was safe and leaned over and kissed Donna Raffaelina with urbanity on both cheeks. Then came Susanna, carrying in her arms the clothes of Sebastiano, who had stripped in the darkness, and Sebastiano and Giulio and Jean-Nicolas were climbing into the water too. "Careful, Sebastiano, my dear!" Donna Raffaelina was calling. "Careful, Giulio! Careful, signor!"

And finally they were all on the other side, chilled with the water and drying their bodies, and they sat down on a great rock above the whirlpool to rest.

"I kept thinking of death," confessed Don Giacinto, "as we crossed the water. The black torrent was death. The sound of the water plunging was the sound of death near by."

"You are excitable, Don Giacinto," said the old woman gently. "The thought of death troubles you unduly. Death is nothing."

"I think of death," the old man admitted, in his beautiful Tuscan voice, "night and day."

Donna Raffaelina sat immovable, like a mountain goddess. "What is death, Don Giacinto? It is nothing. Just a floating away, that is all. A floating away."

"You phrase things tactfully, Donna Raffaelina, as always. But all the same," said the old man, his nerves still somewhat shaken, "death is an unutterably dreadful thing. It seizes us all."

"We all grow old and die," admitted Donna Raffaelina.

A deep silence had fallen on the night around them. Below them the torrent flared in a tense and coiling blackness. There was not a rustle among the mountain ash or the laurels. The only sound was the plunging water. The night was moonless now but blazing with stars, which hung uncannily close, equatorial. The whole world hung wild and close, purged of its impurities. The Alps now appeared to Jean-Nicolás as the pinnacle of the world, and that hood of blackness was the terrible apex from which all truth flowed down among the countries of Europe and trickled away and was dissipated.

Quivar had slipped on his shoes and trousers again, and rejoined the company. He sat down opposite Jean-Nicolas; his huge black eyes passed over the gathering. Their gaze flowed like a pool over Don Giacinto, with a brief bewilderment; over Donna Raffaelina, with humility; over Susanna, with curious caution; over Giulio, with distaste; it lingered on Sebastiano, with subtle speculation; and came to rest on Jean-Nicolas. Through their blackness emerged something harder, shrewder, more audacious than tenderness. For a moment Jean-Nicolas thought he understood; then the

negro's gaze wavered; and again its flavour eluded Jean-Nicolas.

Don Giacinto spoke again. His face was lost in the dark but his white hair shone like a seagull against the night. "We all wither away," he murmured, and for the first time Jean-Nicolas heard something a little deeper than self-regard in his voice; "wither away until nothing is left. To live is to keep losing; to know life is to know what one has lost."

"Tell me. What is it we lose," demanded Donna Raffaelina, "that is so precious?"

"First we lose our innocence," replied the old man. "Then our illusions. Then our beauty. Then our strength. Then our pride. Then our desire. Then we lose our memories and our minds, until finally, when we are drained as dry as a dandelion in mid-August, Donna Raffaelina, we float away, as you say, into just plain nothingness."

"Innocence," she said in hardly more than a whisper. "Beauty. Strength. Pride. Desire. Memories. Have you lost all of those, Don Giacinto? Listen and I will tell you something, Don Giacinto. Not one of these have you lost. Not one."

"My heart is in constant torment," confessed Don Giacinto, flicking a small rock into the water with his forefinger. "All that I have is on the verge of sliding into darkness, like this pebble."

"To me," declared Donna Raffaelina patiently, "death does not seem dreadful, my dear. It is the purest of all processes. It is a release and a return to earth; a caress, a benediction."

"You phrase it cunningly and with elegance, Donna Raffaelina," was the old man's reply, "but, frankly, when I think of death a stab of fire shoots through me! The blindness and the utter loneliness, the bursting into little pieces, the being utterly forgotten. Oh, Donna Raffaelina, it is so simple, so unutterable."

"You must be brave, my dear."

"Death sneers at the brave."

"You must learn," said the old woman, in calm, emphatic tones, as though she had said this many times and well knew she must say it many times to come. "Death will come to you," and the penetrating love she felt for Don Giacinto appeared in her voice, "death will come like a mother, and take you in her arms with a loving calm."

"I keep hoping," said the old man, in a thin, unreal voice, "that there may be some way out; some stratagem of escape. My dear, is your love for me great enough to fight death from my side?"

"I will stay with you always," replied Donna Raffaelina, "and will fight for you with all my power and soul. That you know, Don Giacinto, and it will always be so."

"Would you die for me to save me, Donna Raffaelina?" he asked softly.

"A thousand deaths, Don Giacinto."

"If I die," he said, after a moment, "may it be swiftly and without my knowledge; and in stillness and secrecy."

He fell silent and folded his hands; his gaze rested on the ruby which glimmered dimly on his finger. The rest sat silent too, half touched and half repelled by the majestic cowardice of the old man. Quivar's eyes had grown immense with a kind of heathen awe as he listened, and Giulio sat in a bitter, contemptuous silence. Donna Raffaelina rose. "Let us go. I am strong. I am able to climb another mountain tonight," she declared. "Are we ready? Are you ready, Susanna?"

Chapter Eighteen

THE stars overhead were growing dimmer; very faintly they could see the undulation of the ranges. It was three o'clock.

"Now," Quivar said to Jean-Nicolas in his broad Antilles accent, "now we pass into Faucigny. Now we are leaving the Genevois. I know this country well, monsieur. Every hill I know. Every stream and every streamlet."

The landscape had been growing wilder and more imposing. Far behind them now lay the Pointe d'Andey and the Pointe de Jallouvre and the Pointe-Percée, one behind the other and each still higher than the other; and the Pointe-Percée unfurling into the blue of the night looked as though it had receded into wild, airy elements; it looked like a flame.

"I know it well," said Quivar with pride, as they walked wearily up a pebbled slope covered with laurels. "This country is now like Chablais and Chamonix. It is now almost wholly under the *maquisards*. Now and then," he continued, and a sudden passion rose in his voice, "now and then the enemy sends troops and seizes hostages and burns a village to the ground, but that is nothing. Now and then two enemy tanks roll by or an enemy plane searches out the camps. But it means nothing, monsieur. It is a display and nothing more."

The air was growing unbelievably pure and clear. It was still night, but the quiver of shadow was sharpening; every leaf, every mountain-top was emerging from the haze, like a ship at morning emerging from a foggy sea. They had been climbing for an hour. Jean-Nicolas was stiff with weariness. The two old people were silent and their steps had grown heavy; a dull fatigue was veiling their faces. They were creeping toward the passes to the north-east, where Switzerland lay nearest.

"Look," said Quivar, his low negro voice tense with joy. He had turned and was pointing to the south-west. "Can you see, monsieur?"

Jean-Nicolas again saw the Pointe d'Andey and the Pointe de Jallouvre and the Pointe-Percée, and beyond these three peaks he saw a pale triangular shadow; he

saw a tremor of light against the loosening darkness, like a tent pitched in the middle of a desert. It looked like a mirage, about to vanish; and even the Pointe-Percée looked small and earthly in comparison.

"That," breathed Quivar, "is the great one! One can see it from here only on the clearest of days! . . . It is a thing of glory. Look, monsieur. Do you see it trembling?" His voice was hoarse with emotion. And the white tent seemed to flutter in the desert darkness for a moment, as though a wind had passed. Then it grew still and the oyster light of early morning touched the pinnacle.

Soon Sebastiano came up shyly and began to walk beside Jean-Nicolas. The ground was covered with long, lichen-covered boulders, and now and then they passed a small pool, iridescent in the dim grey light. The early dew had varnished the mossy stones and made them slippery and they had to step carefully.

Sebastiano's face was dark and drawn with effort; he was carrying the black bag for Giulio.

"Are you tired, Sebastiano?"

"Not tired," he replied, looking up at Jean-Nicolas with manly dignity. "But the others are tired. Don Giacinto and Donna Raffaelina are very tired. Soon they must rest. They are strong and full of endurance and a long walk is nothing at all to them, but the mountains are new; this climbing and climbing is new for us all."

Sebastiano was a handsome olive-coloured boy. His voice was raw and shy, still groping to find its true virile quality. He was scarcely more than a boy, but the heavy load of desire already shone through his eyes and his voice. His black hair curled over his forehead and above the brown nape of his neck, crisp and rich like a cocker spaniel's. His eyes were bright with expectancy, but there lingered in them still the dark lustre of sexual melancholy and shame.

He paused and placed the black bag on the ground and

knelt down beside a pool of water, shaped like a violin, tucked among the rocks. He dipped his dark warm head into the pool and splashed the cold water over his neck and shoulders. Then he rose again, his black hair gleaming, drops of water sparkling on his long eyelashes and his downy upper lip. He smiled with joy at Jean-Nicolas.

"You have travelled much, signor?"

"Well, I have travelled often, Sebastiano."

"Even in Africa, as Susanna told me?"

"In Africa when I was a boy."

"And in America, signor?"

"In America too, Sebastiano."

"I have seven uncles in America, signor. Seven."

"That is a lot of uncles in America, Sebastiano. Even for an American."

"Two are husbands of my father's sisters and two are my mother's brothers and two are husbands of my mother's sisters. Then there is a seventh, but he is a mystery. Perhaps you have met him? His name is Zanichelli."

"America is a big country, Sebastiano. Where does he live?"

"Oh," sighed Sebastiano, "that too is a mystery. One uncle lives in the city of New York, and one in the city of Fall River, and one in the jungle of Florida. And one, I think, in the mountains. One lives in a large motor-car, of which I have seen a photograph. One appears to live in a train. But the seventh is a mystery and possibly a disgrace. There is nothing but secrecy when I ask Donna Raffaelina about this seventh uncle."

"Perhaps he has become a millionaire, Sebastiano."

"No, signor, I think it must be a thing still more vulgar."

"What, for example, Sebastiano?"

"It is perhaps that he has become a politician. It must be some such thing at the very least to reduce Donna Raffaelina to secrecy, signor. . . . Tell me, signor?"

"Yes, Sebastiano?" They were crossing a stony plateau naked of trees and dotted with glassy pools which glimmered red through the darkness.

"That is of course all propaganda, signor, about the towers?"

"Which towers, Sebastiano?"

"The ones behind the statue where the ships come in? As I have heard? As high as five cathedrals?"

"They exist, Sebastiano."

Sebastiano fell into thought, and then inquired: "I suppose then, signor, that the gangsters likewise exist? And the tarantulas and so on?"

Jean-Nicolas admitted that in certain areas gangsters still survived, and tarantulas in others.

"I see," sighed Sebastiano. "America is a land of monsters after all. I see. A land of barbarism."

"Tarantulas," said Jean-Nicolas tactfully, "exist in the ancient lands of Europe and Asia too, Sebastiano. And even gangsters."

"Possibly, signor. But not those towers. Not those towers full of bathrooms and other curious kinds of machinery." Then he said rather furtively: "Listen, signor."

"Yes, Sebastiano?"

"I have discussed a certain matter with my sister Susanna."

"Yes?"

"It is this. Neither Susanna nor I, to be quite frank about it, have much belief in God and the soul. Don't repeat this, please. It would upset Donna Raffaelina. All the same, it is true. There is one thing, however, which baffles us, signor."

"And that, Sebastiano?"

"It is hard to explain." He frowned with the effort of concentration. His voice was touched with anxiety. "It is this. I am I. You are you. Susanna is Susanna. But why? How did I happen to become myself? Born in

Messina in a yellow house with a red roof? Thinking thoughts inside my own body? And everyone else outside and separate? Do I make myself clear, signor?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded. "I think so, Sebastiano."

"Ah, then you have wondered the same thing, signor. Very well. Even in America and Africa, I see, they have no explanation for this affair. It is truly mysterious: here I am, Sebastiano is my name, crossing the mountains of a foreign land, on a particular day. Why was I not born a thousand years ago, in China, with a different name? Or perhaps in the shape of a snake, or a snail? Can you explain this?"

"No," Jean-Nicolas replied, "not I, Sebastiano."

"Can they explain it in New York, perhaps?" he inquired. "Some prominent scientist has perhaps discovered how to explain it?"

"I doubt it, Sebastiano."

"Very well," he said, with deep satisfaction. "Susanna and I were quite right. It is as we feared. A truly mysterious affair. Even the distinguished scientists are baffled."

Suddenly, on some tender, obscure impulse, he turned his head and his warm brown fingers grazed lightly over Jean-Nicolas' wrist. "Oh, signor," he whispered, with a hoarse music in his voice, "I long to be like you. . . . Brave and clever and important. . . . I long to be a hero, like you!" His voice rose in a sudden sweetness of yearning. "Oh, signor, I would be glad to suffer, and even die, if I could be a hero! I do not wish to live long and grow soft and old! I wish only to do some clever, brave thing, to be a hero like you! And then I should be willing to die. . . ." His voice melted away, and he continued to walk in a silent, passionate shyness.

They had come to a tiny mountain lake, and the pearl-grey, pearl-patterned clouds in the widening sky lay darkened and motionless in the water. Donna Raffaelina sat down on a stone and placed her hands with weariness

in front of her face. "Here we shall rest," said Don Giacinto, breathing heavily. "We go no further. Here we shall sleep."

The little lake shone like a black crystal in the lap of the rocks. Night insects swarmed in parallel arrays low over the water. One great spreading mountain pine stood at its side, and under this they gathered.

Chapter Nineteen

QUIVAR came up to Jean-Nicolas at the side of the lake and touched him lightly on the forearm. "We must go on now, monsieur. You and I."

"And the others, Quivar?"

"They are weary. They are slow, monsieur. It is you and I, and that is all, and soon we must be off. Come. Look," and he led Jean-Nicolas up a heathery hillock at the brink of the lake. He stood on a great stone and pointed into the valley. A river was curving along the valley, fringed on each side by a cushion of willows, and at the bend of the river, almost out of sight and yet surprisingly near, lay a town. The angular pattern of chimneys and roofs with the one tall steeple shone velvety red through the early light.

"Before the sun rises," remarked Quivar, "we go. In less than an hour it will rise; and before then we must go. We shall be on our way through the wood. They," and he nodded toward the Italians, "can rest. They can sleep. No one will trouble them."

"They are travellers like you and I," said Jean-Nicolas. "Remember that, Quivar. They are in danger."

"Not they," said Quivar patiently. "No one will trouble an old Italian couple and two Italian children and an Italian cripple. Neither the Vichy militia nor the Germans are interested in such types: they are safe enough. It is you and I."

Jean-Nicolas looked down at the town. Suddenly a wave of memory swam forth from the haze; and he looked at the river again and then at the olive-grey hills beyond.

"What is the name of that town, Quivar?"

"That is St. Pierre de Rumilly, monsieur."

"And that river down there?"

"That is the river Arve."

"Quivar," whispered Jean-Nicolas, tense with excitement. "Listen, Quivar. I know that river well. I know that town. I remember those hills. I went to school in that little town. For four years, Quivar. There was a time when I knew every stone in that little town."

Quivar looked at him thoughtfully with his bottomless black eyes; he shook his head. "It is a strange thing nowadays. Here you and I are standing on a hill in the Haute-Savoie, monsieur, and you were born in Alexandria and I was born in Martinique." He took a deep breath. "The world has torn us from our roots. The war has swept us apart and swept us together again. Why? Why, monsieur?"

"It is the same thing for both of us, Quivar." Jean-Nicolas nodded, lost in conjecture. "We are a little of this and of that and the other. We are men without a country, you and I, Quivar." He looked at Quivar with a sudden pang of compassion; at the great Antilles negro, lost in his jungle of loneliness, standing among the Alps and gazing into the exquisite French valley.

The negro looked back at him with animal solemnity in his eyes. "You and I, monsieur, are citizens of the world. We are homeless. Our home is the world. Some day," he murmured resonantly, "all men will be like you and me. All will be equal. East and west. Black and white. Yes, monsieur. And all will have the world as their fatherland."

"You are a dreamer, Quivar."

"My dreams always come true, monsieur."

"And it is for your dreams," said Jean-Nicolas, look-

ing into Quivar's bottomless eyes, "and only for your dreams, that you are fighting?"

"Dreams?" Quivar's black eyes stared at him with wonder. For the first time his voice began to tremble with passion. "Not only for dreams! It is for vengeance that we, the outcasts, are fighting! It is for blood, monsieur, that we who have bled are fighting!"

A hard, brutal gleam appeared in Quivar's eyes. "Do you wish to know," he whispered, "why my heart cries for blood? . . . Look." He drew open his trousers and pointed to his groin; drops of sweat were shining on his forehead.

"Look, monsieur." There was a blue wound crossing his thighs; the testicles had withered to a raw, blue mass of wrinkles. "One of their informers betrayed me: a man from Chambéry. It was two winters ago. For five days I lay naked in prison. Without light. Without food. Then they led me into the room of interrogation. I was still naked and shivering with cold; I could hardly walk. They laid me on my back on a table and tied my arms and legs beneath me. Like this." He spread his legs and leaned back. "Then they began with the matches. One by one they struck the matches and placed them . . . here." He pointed. "Ten, twenty, fifty of them. At first they asked questions; but it was only a formality. Finally the questioning stopped. But the burning of the matches continued. . . . They departed for their dinner but returned after dinner and continued. I prayed for death, monsieur. I could not cry with my mouth but my heart kept crying."

And suddenly Quivar's eyes filled with a new, barbaric sadness. He looked with passion deep into Jean-Nicolas' eyes; his voice was almost inaudible. "How can I ever explain to you, monsieur, what I have done? . . . So that you, and other men, might some day forgive me? . . . Ah, monsieur, there are certain terrible things which only God, in His infinite awareness, can understand and pardon . . . perhaps . . . but how can we ever know?"

Jean-Nicolas turned toward the pine tree where the Italians were sitting. The night was fading. The light of the morning had not yet fallen where they were, but on the higher peaks to the south it was already settling. A bonnet of light was hanging on the Pointe d'Andey; a shower of grey light fell from the Pointe de Jallouvre. But the mountain lake below was still glassy with night. The air had grown delicate and cool and elusive. It was still early spring here in the mountains; the warmth was still timorous, transitory.

"It is morning," cried Don Giacinto with the joy of well-earned fatigue in his voice. "Time to rest. Time to sleep."

Everyone leaned back and smelled the miraculous morning air: it was suddenly full of a wandering delight. It was alive, interwoven with measureless strands of fragrance. There was a tingling in Jean-Nicolas. From every side a new scent issued like a new note of music and joined the sinuous, floating melody. There was the scent of icy water in the clear mountain lake and the scent of mountain moss at the water's edge. There was the scent of pine twigs bitter and syrupy with sap, and there was the scent of sun-tawny heather and ferns and wild anemones and laurel. There was the faint and travelling scent of fallen birds' feathers, and of the white stains of excrement and empty cocoons; and also the scent of lichen crisp and clinging on the rocks, and the powder scent of the rocks themselves, the scent of prehistory.

Don Giacinto then recited, with a wistful, melodious reverence in his voice:

Primavera odorata, inspiri e tenti
Questo gelido cor, questo ch'amara
Nel fior degli anni suoi vecchiezza impara?

Susanna rose and said "Look," and touched Jean-Nicolas lightly on the hand. Two mountain butterflies, red and silver, were bobbing along the grasses near the

water's edge. "Come, signor," she said. "Let us explore. You and I."

They walked along the edge of the smooth black lake, watching the various small creatures opening to the morning. There were the insects stirring and spiders skimming the water and the lone kingfisher high overhead. They heard the dry rustle among the laurels, and from far away they heard the chatter of small birds filtering through all of a sudden.

"Look," said Susanna, and pointed at two swallows gliding through the mountain dawnlight. "How happy they are. Their day has begun."

"And their struggle has begun again," said Jean-Nicolas. "Soon they will begin to devour one another."

"And yet they are wholly happy at this moment," said Susanna.

"Not wholly," said Jean-Nicholas, his voice tense and low. "Only a man can be wholly happy."

"No, no, signor. No man is ever wholly happy."

"Only a man, Susanna, can foresee his death and thus taste the real, pungent flavour of happiness."

"These butterflies and birds," murmured Susanna, "are happy because they are unaware of death. For them joy is everlasting. Nothing troubles their delight."

"Yes; and so are the waves happy before they break. And the leaves before they fall. And the dayflies before they fall to the ground. But that surely is not the utter happiness, Susanna."

"Well, and what is the utter happiness for you, signor?"

"I hardly know," he said, after a moment; "but I know that with me it is different, Susanna. I feel a strange sharp happiness in knowing that what I have is only for a time, and that everything must die, and that every moment even among ten million moments is unrecapturable and glittering and then gone and lost in a devouring blackness. Yes, more and more I feel this, Susanna. The leaves look

greener every year; the clouds look whiter; and when I think that soon I will never see them again, the pines smell more spicy and the flight of birds looks more dazzling than ever before. I keep saying to myself: there, there it is; soon it will be gone for ever. And then a fever grips me, Susanna, and I can hardly tell whether it is despair or happiness. I call it happiness."

"It is a dangerous kind of happiness," said Susanna sombrely.

"And what is happiness to you, Susanna?"

"To me?" she said, looking at Jean-Nicolas with sudden intimacy in her dark earnest eyes. "I don't know, signor. To me it is happiness when I suddenly feel that I shall live for ever. When the thought of death and old age vanish and I look at the hills and the trees and they seem everlasting; and then I too feel everlasting. No," she declared ardently, "I do not intend to die. I intend to stay exactly as I am. I intend to stay free. I intend to stay alone. And I want to forget all things that remind me of death."

They were standing between two tall rocks; with small ferns coiling at their feet and the black water beyond, smooth as obsidian.

"Let us sit down, signor."

"You are a curious girl, Susanna."

"It is because she wanted a boy before I was born, Donna Raffaelina tells me. I am like a boy, she keeps telling me."

"May I ask you a question, Susanna?"

She nodded cautiously; a subtle glance appeared in her eyes.

"But I shall lie in reply if I choose! I warn you, signor.

Jean-Nicolas looked at her cool firm lips; a troubled sweetness spread through his veins; and he asked:

"Have you ever had a lover, Susanna? I can't help wondering."

She looked at Jean-Nicolas calmly. She paused and

then remarked: "Very well. I shall tell you the truth. Yes. I have had a lover."

Jean-Nicolas glanced at her again; she had raised her right hand thoughtfully, her lips were grazing the golden links of her bracelet. He wasn't sure she had understood. Her eyes shone with mischief. He whispered:

"And was he fully your lover? With heart and with body?"

"Of course," she said with serenity. "He came to me, and he held me in his arms, and he did all that he chose with me, again and again."

Jean-Nicolas looked across the lake. There was an unreality, a sensation of atavism and dream, in the black glassy water fringed with masses of rock.

"You needn't," she added in a low purr, "imagine that I am still a virgin, signor."

There was a sudden solemnity in the way she said this, and a touch of defiance.

"And now," she said, "may I ask you a question too?"

"Please."

"What is it, signor, you would like to do with me? . . . Kiss me? Is that all?"

Jean-Nicolas felt his heart tighten curiously.

"I hardly know, Susanna," he burst out suddenly. "The way you are sitting there, and the way your voice rises and falls, and your hand straying among the ferns, your eyes laughing secretly. To possess you. That is what I want. I want to hold you in my arms, Susanna."

"But you would also," she said calmly, "like to kiss me, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," he whispered.

"Would you like to sleep with me too, by any chance?"

He turned and looked at her. She was staring at his forehead with a childlike gravity: she had slid behind a veil. He did not dare to answer.

"Well," she continued, "I cannot allow that, naturally. But," and she reached over and placed her hand lightly

on his in a swift grazing motion, "you may kiss me if you wish, signor."

He placed his arms around her, and she closed her eyes with a swift little sigh, and her coppery head fell soft on his shoulder; the cool gold of her bracelet caressed his neck; and a moment later she drew back again and rose.

"It is morning," Don Giacinto announced as they approached the pine tree. He cast a rapid, appraising glance at Susanna; his voice grew tactful, deliberate. "Look," he said. "Sebastiano is climbing the tree."

They looked up. Sebastiano was clinging to the top of the pine tree.

"Sebastiano has wonderful eyes," said the old man proudly. "What do you see, Sebastiano?"

Sebastiano didn't answer.

Quivar had just joined the group again and he too was watching Sebastiano with a dark, intuitive smile.

"Well, Sebastiano," repeated the old man. "Tell us. Do you see anything?"

Sebastiano was climbing along a limb and didn't answer.

"Sebastiano, which is it," said the old man irritably, "are you deaf or blind or entirely speechless?"

"I see a winding river," said Sebastiano, a bit out of breath.

"The river Arve, it is," said Quivar, with delight in his great eyes.

"And a town with red roofs and a steeple in the bend of the river, and then the river turns and joins another river," Sebastiano called down from the top of the tree.

"It is St. Pierre de Rumilly," said Quivar triumphantly, "and it is the bend where the river Borne flows into the river Arve."

"Very well. What else do you see, Sebastiano," inquired Don Giacinto. "Any signs of life?"

"Nothing near by, Don Giacinto. Just trees. Far

below us a road. Two little black houses. Little white speckles that must be sheep."

"No smoke rising from the houses?"

"I see no smoke."

"No other animals? No horses? No dogs?"

"No. None."

"Very well, Sebastiano," said the old man contentedly. "Climb down again, please. Now we can go to sleep in peace. Bring the bag, Donna Raffaelina, so that I can lay my head on the ground. Lie down, Giulio, you look tired."

Jean-Nicolas came up to the old man.

"We must go now, Don Giacinto," he said softly. "My friend Quivar and I. We shall continue on our way."

Don Giacinto had closed his eyes; he didn't seem to be listening.

Jean-Nicolas too began to feel there was something unreal in this good-bye; something dreamlike and capricious. He felt a mellow, wandering pang; but not the sharp ache of finality; and his heart was still full of a secret, swelling triumph.

"Farewell, Don Giacinto. Farewell, Donna Raffaelina."

"My blessings on both of you," said Donna Raffaelina sweetly and without surprise. "And be careful, my dear boy. May God protect you. Don't slip and fall on those slippery rocks."

"Farewell, Giulio." Giulio reached out his one hand and shook hands in silence and with a strange grimness. "Farewell, Sebastiano." The boy's eyes glowed among the branches, suddenly dark and inscrutable, and he replied in a low voice, "Farewell, stranger! Take all my friendliness with you!"

"Farewell, Susanna," Jean-Nicolas said softly, "until we meet again." She looked at him quite calmly and with sudden dignity; her eyes were subdued and expressionless; and then she looked away.

"Farewell, my friends," he called back to them, and Quivar and he waved their arms. The dark Italian faces were all turned gravely in his direction and they looked curiously wistful, curiously lonely suddenly, as they raised their arms and waved back.

Quivar and Jean-Nicolas climbed over the smooth dark rocks beside the lake; the rocks grew greener, the smells grew herbaceous; and they wandered on until they came to the woods.

Chapter Twenty

OVER the bend in the birch wood they could see St. Pierre de Rumilly clear and close: a radiating mosaic of red roofs, grey roofs, grey walls, buff walls, framed in the glittering precision of the foliage.

"I never saw it from up here," Jean-Nicolas said. "It looks strange, Quivar. I see nothing familiar. Not a thing that I remember."

Quivar glanced carefully at him and said, "We shall avoid the town and keep to the east, monsieur. Then we cross the river Arve. And then we head for the river Giffre."

"How far is it to the town?"

"From here?"

"Yes, from here."

"Three kilometres perhaps, monsieur."

"Very well, Quivar. I am going into the town."

"Then you are insane," observed the negro placidly; "the town is dangerous and carefully guarded. But what you say comes hardly as a surprise. I have been watching you, monsieur. Go. I shall wait." He smiled dreamily.

The great rocks were gliding into a coral-paleness. A heathery scent came forth from the long hollows; there was a ruddy play of air in the heather.

"I knew every stone in St. Pierre de Rumilly when I was a child, Quivar."

"Yes. That is it," said Quivar tactfully, with the faintest undertone of irony. "You wish to visit the town of your childhood."

"I loved St. Pierre de Rumilly, Quivar. There was a beautiful garden. There were small cakes shaped like boats and filled with whipped cream for Sunday tea."

Quivar sighed with a curious sadness; his black eyes caressed Jean-Nicolas for a last time, with a kind of velvety desolation. "I shall wait for you above the cross-roads, monsieur."

"You have no desire to see it, Quivar?"

"It is not desires that I feel today, monsieur, but caution."

Quivar sat down under an elderberry bush and leaned his head against a tree trunk. His black savage head began to nod sleepily; his great eyes glowed with an inhuman weariness. He looked, thought Jean-Nicolas, so very lost, so pitifully out of place. He looked, thought Jean-Nicolas, as though he were longing to go back home and to fall asleep for ever.

"Farewell, Quivar, my friend," he said, but there was no reply, and he started to climb down the hill and to make his way circuitously toward the town. Now it was dawn.

The greyness in the sky had congealed into massive, motionless clouds that hung over the sliding rockside. Between the clouds the sky was turning bluer as he watched. A tense and windless day was beginning.

What was it he remembered of St. Pierre de Rumilly? Odds and ends; fragments from the bright, oracular puzzle of childhood. He remembered the amber walls of the Church of St. Ursule, and the nuns passing silently among the chestnut trees. And he remembered how the massive trees grew skeletal in the winter, and how crystals of ice formed in the iron fountain. He remembered how the snow clung in crusts from the gravestones in the

cemetery. He remembered the smell of soap and steam in the village laundry, where his aunt Clémentine took the washing each Thursday; and the icicles hanging over the windows of the pastry shop, and the tarts with coils of chestnut purée behind the frosted panes. He remembered the little cuffs of lace paper adorning the roast chicken every Sunday; as well as the glass ball in the writing-room which filled with snow when he shook it, with the snow drifting slowly past a tiny Notre Dame. How much of it was left?

A gradual, arid feeling of disappointment came over him as he entered the town. The sunrise was crawling down from the hills. It was a dawn without beauty. The clouds were parting slowly and a dry, monotonous light was slowly widening. In the streets the first signs of life emerged with a kind of elaborate lethargy. It was Sunday, and already the dull, bleak gravity of a Sunday morning was perceptible.

Everything seemed empty. He felt neither the pang of recognition nor the pang of suspense. The houses were dim and faded and curiously small; the place seemed weirdly dehumanized; there was an air of paralysis. He walked down the narrow street with care, trying not to quicken his pace nor seem conspicuous.

No one appeared to notice him. Once an old woman in black gloves raised her eyes and gazed into his face, as he imagined, with a bland and penetrating cunning, and glanced away again. He paused and looked about. It was, after all, a dull, commonplace little town, like a thousand others; and even the hills beyond had a commonplace look. The people moved wordlessly and with a frozen, listless stare the meaning of which eluded him; yet he felt there was a hidden meaning. He turned a corner and walked slowly toward the village square. And now something in him began to expand. A dark, almost painful expectancy began to stir his senses. He passed a small butcher's shop with the shade drawn, and

the village chemist's. He read the signs with acute deliberation: PIERRE LAHARPE, CHARCUTERIE; JEAN MALYE, PHARMACIEN. He felt his skin tingling. Something came alive at the centre of his spine and whispered slowly: "I am being watched."

He turned casually: there was no one behind him.

He approached the square. And now at last a stirring of love came over him; a recognition so frail, so hidden that he could hardly detect its cause. On the left stood the *hôtel de ville*, rose-coloured, and very badly in need of a coat of paint. Opposite the *hôtel de ville* ran a row of plane trees; under these stood some café tables and chairs, looking rather shabby, with the paint chipped and rusty. In the middle of the square was the fountain, an iron basin, waterless and without ornament. Beyond, among some shrubs, peered a small bust of Racine: this he now dimly recognized. And he recognized the dark walls of the village church. He recognized the trees where the nuns had walked in silence. What he did not recognize was the sudden, breath-taking splendour of the four great chestnut trees. They rose beside the church, in full flower, the one thing in the village that shimmered and exulted with a morning brilliance. The morning sun now moved across the square; it shone pallid and bleak until it reached the chestnut trees; and then came suddenly alive with a rippling and a climbing and a showering brightness. Everything else looked pale and static.

People came wandering slowly across the square; old ones all of them, in their Sabbath clothes. They scarcely glanced at Jean-Nicolas. The billowing white peasant hats looked faintly familiar, and the black Sunday dresses with bits of red on the cuffs and the high black shoes, worn at the heels and cracked with age but sedulously polished. No one said a word. They looked like figures on a chessboard, mute and rigid, mysteriously interrelated. He stood still. He felt that he was dreaming. At the

further end of the square rose the steeple of St. Ursule, a dark square tower with a tense blue sheen; suddenly, as the great clouds moved by like a warning, it looked as though it were about to explode.

He followed the others into the church. The bells had begun to ring and the sound floated slowly over the mountains and lingered and shivered in the high distances. A cool soft light filled the interior of the church. There was a smell of starched peasant dresses and polished boots, and a churchly smell of moist old stone, of worn plush and old candles and obliterated incense. The sacristan was still absorbed in lighting the candles. Now the priest emerged from the sacristy, adjusting the folds of his chasuble; then he joined his hands and moved in a lynx-like gait toward the nave, followed by a small, desperate, dark-haired boy in tortoise-shell glasses, who kept stumbling over his ill-fitting surplice.

The liturgical prayers began. Each old woman was kneeling at her own *prie-dieu*, petrified by the chill of habit and piety. The words continued:

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . .

And then:

Dies irae, dies illa. . . .

All rose at the first Gospel. Finally there was the consecration; and the Host, pale and gleaming, shone in the priest's hand for a moment.

As he left the church and sauntered across the silent square, now flooded with sunlight, Jean-Nicolas saw a stout middle-aged man sitting on the edge of the fountain. He was the only man under sixty he had seen; he looked quite ordinary in every way and held a yellow book half open in his hand, the forefinger between the pages. As Jean-Nicolas passed he slowly raised his head. Their eyes met. Jean-Nicolas wandered casually on.

Presently he turned round. No one was following him.

Yet as he looked down the empty street he was assaulted by a stab of fear so sharp that his whole body began to vibrate. His stomach shot up and a cold sparkle swam over his eyes. It was like a needle, so swift and piercing that he had no time to consider its cause.

The feeling passed as irrationally and suddenly as it had come. He wandered on. Soon he stood in front of a doorway above which he read: Hôtel de la Poste. He entered.

THE THIRD NIGHT

Chapter Twenty-One

It was a long narrow room. The glass door at the end of the room opened on an iron balcony, but the yellow lace curtains were drawn and a stale, amphibious twilight filled the room. Jean-Nicolas drew the curtains to one side and tried to open the glass door, but it was locked. There was no key.

There was a sound of someone knocking on a door. He turned; but he couldn't quite be sure whether the door had been his own. There was a dim scuffle of footsteps down the linoleum-covered hall: in the distance he could hear the grunt of a door softly opening and closing.

The room was aridly furnished. There was a small table of bird's-eye maple; a carpet with a worn and faded pattern of roses; a brass bedstead, a dark wardrobe, a straight black chair and an enamelled metal bidet. The wallpaper was covered with an indigo trellis from which hung immense and improbable poppies.

The air in the room was thick and moist; the smell was like that of an old burlap sack.

Jean-Nicolas was about to ring for a key to the balcony door; but as reached for the bell a sudden indecision rose in him. He took off his shoes and walked slowly to the window.

Half-way down the street he could see an old church; not the one he had visited but one far smaller and older. The walls were of a curiously lovely reddish stone which had been restored at some more recent date and overburdened with nineteenth-century ornamentation; shells, scrolls, floating cherubs of stone and stucco. Above the doorway was a niche; in the niche Jean-Nicolas could just barely see the statue of an old saint, hollow-cheeked and stiff-jointed, blackened, medieval, his bald head spattered by generations of pigeons.

This odd little building Jean-Nicolas felt sure he had never seen before. It emerged from the surrounding buildings with a fortuitous, humble dignity; and it gave to the whole street a timeless and delicate calm. Old people stood in the doorways near by, motionless as phantoms and expressionless. A group of children appeared out of nowhere. They scarcely seemed to move, but when they did it was a motion stiff and arthritic and wintry. Young men were nowhere to be seen. No one spoke. No one smiled.

Again it seemed to Jean-Nicolas that someone had knocked very lightly at the door. Or rather, that fingers had hesitantly grazed the panel and paused in the middle of the gesture.

He looked out toward the village square. Under the plane trees he could see the *patron* setting out the red cigarette trays on the metal tables. The awning was being unrolled. A girl was sweeping the paving. An old woman in black bombazine was watering the geraniums in the window-boxes. The plane trees began to shiver lightly in the morning breeze, and a single customer arrived and sat down at a table and continued to sit there; but no waiter appeared and he ordered nothing. There was a masklike air of peacefulness and permanence.

Jean-Nicolas turned back into the room, took off his shoes and lay down on the bed.

The he heard for a third time a knocking on the door: this time crisp and unequivocal.

He hesitated. Had he forgotten to lock the door? He wasn't sure. "Come in," he said quietly.

A small, rather corpulent man in a grey striped suit opened the door and entered. He paused in the middle of the room. He was carrying a brown hat in one hand and a small book in the other.

"Please," he murmured apologetically. "Don't get up. It is inexcusably rude of me; and I know you must be

tired." He smiled. "I shall only be a moment," he added delicately, and placed his hat and book, with an air of precision, on the bird's-eye maple table.

He strolled sedately to the window and gazed out and sighed deeply. Jean-Nicolas could see only his back. He could see the short, squat, emphatic yet amorphous shape in front of the lace curtains, clouding the morning sun. The man had folded his arms and his posture suggested infinite patience, calculation, and just a touch of ferocity.

"Lovely weather," he observed.

Jean-Nicolas lay back and stared at the ceiling, trying to control the beating of his heart.

"A late spring," the visitor added pointedly, "brings a warm summer. Doesn't it?"

He turned round cheerfully. Now Jean-Nicolas could see his face clearly. He was an ugly little man. His bald head was like a pink china pot. It was placed squat on the shoulders, with no neck intervening. His lips were long and flabby and continuously in motion as though he were chewing at a rubber ball. His eyelids were covered with a roseate scaly substance; he must have been suffering from a skin disease, for his hands too were blistered and faintly inflamed. His eyes were small green pellets and stared past Jean-Nicolas into space with a lingering relish. He looked thoroughly coarse; his lips were coarse and his hands were coarse and his whole fat little body was indescribably coarse. But his voice was a prim and mincing singsong. His hands kept fluttering ornately and benevolently before him.

He stood and continued to gaze past Jean-Nicolas at the door.

"I can imagine your feelings," he announced in urbane tones, "at this highly thoughtless and apparently quite unwarranted intrusion. Yes," he went on quickly, as if wishing to silence any protest, "monstrously thoughtless. You have been on an exhausting journey. You need sleep. That is quite obvious, my dear fellow, in your eyes:

you can hardly keep them open. Very well. I am discreet. I have a sense of delicacy. I shall only be a moment."

He came closer, and placed two thick pink fingers on the lacquered table top. With his other hand he leafed absently through the small yellow book that lay beside the hat.

"Ah," he said quickly, for the first time glancing directly at Jean-Nicolas, "I see you recognize me. Little wonder. I cut, as I am quite aware, a rather striking figure in this vicinity. The impression I create, I fear, is not altogether alpine. The truth is, I come from Marseilles. Would you guess it? Does my accent suggest the *Midi*? Forgive me, monsieur. I see I am wasting your time on trivialities. May I sit down?" He drew up the small black chair and sat down, his squat little legs parted and the grey striped trousers stretched smoothly over the flesh.

"You are a stranger here?" His voice was gentle but firm.

"I am," said Jean-Nicolas.

"You've never been here before?" He kept sucking at his teeth between phrases.

"No," said Jean-Nicolas.

"You are French, I presume?"

"Half French. Half Italian," lied Jean-Nicolas.

The man sighed patiently, rather reproachfully. "You regard me, no doubt, with a certain hostility, monsieur, and more than a little distrust. And, indeed, quite justifiably. But may I make a humble suggestion? Suspend your judgment; temporarily at least; that's all I ask of you. A slight effort, perhaps, but an act of charity."

It occurred to Jean-Nicolas, at this point, that the man might be insane.

He had begun to tap gently on the table top with his finger-tips. The moist burlap scent in the room had become rich and sickening. Jean-Nicolas detected a vague scent of lavender in the air. He glanced at the

yellow book which lay on the table. It was a cheap paper-bound edition of La Fontaine's *Fables*.

"May I tell you a story?" the man then began. "Visitors to St. Pierre de Rumilly are relatively rare these days, as luck will have it. I relish the opportunity of telling a story. The story, I may add, concerns the town itself. It was once a secluded and idyllic mountain village, monsieur. As you can doubtless imagine. Then came the war; it remained unaffected. Even after the German victories it scarcely changed. Only many months later, long after the German officials had quietly settled here, did a change begin to make itself felt.

"At first it was almost imperceptible. A slight increase in humidity. A growing stillness in the air. Little by little it became more noticeable. Whenever a German asked the way, the townsmen misdirected him. They began to whisper pointedly whenever a German passed: on the street, in the café, in the bus, even in the town brothel.

"Anonymous letters began to flood the German headquarters in the *hôtel de ville*, full of misleading denunciations; likewise letters retailing the infidelities of the German soldiers' wives back home. Meaningless flashes of light were sent off at night-time. Rumours began to circulate about sexual misdemeanours. An atmosphere of scandal began to surround the Germans."

He smiled demurely and pressed the fingers of his two hands together, so that they formed an isosceles triangle. He sucked absently at his teeth and looked at the ceiling, and continued.

"Little boys began to chalk meaningless signs on the walls and doorways. Crosses, pentangles, recurring groups of numbers. In the bars they served beer that was a bit 'off,' and wine that was corked. The Germans began to develop persecution mania. But this was not all. Things grew steadily worse.

"In the canals down in the valley the bascule bridges

were left open; barges were delayed; sluices were left ajar. Carpenters built doors that didn't fit, and all the windows became draughty in the houses where Germans were billeted. In the chemist's shop an atmosphere of winks and whispers was deftly created whenever certain embarrassing commodities were asked for. The cooks put laxatives in the food. Itching powders were sprinkled on the toilet seats. The dentist insisted on pulling teeth superfluously, and on using insufficient anaesthetics, and on drilling unnecessary holes in which inadequate fillings were inserted. Most of it was still rather harmless. There was still an element of humour. But it kept on growing worse, monsieur."

He kept gazing at the ceiling and shook his head, and then sucked once again at his greenish teeth with an air of delicate reproach.

"The fishermen poisoned the fish. The florists dipped their flowers in salt water. The factory hands down in Bonneville failed to oil the machines and spilled corroding acids on the more sensitive instruments, not to mention lounging for half an hour at a stretch in the lavatories.

"In the hotel the wrong shoes were replaced in front of the doors by the bootblack. The toilets ran short of paper. Nasty smells emerged from under the beds. The musicians played Mendelssohn interminably, or else they played German waltzes out of tune. Truck drivers kept puncturing the radiators, and stuck potatoes on the exhaust pipes, and pissed into the fuel tanks. Nothing really serious, mind you. But it was a bit of a strain. And it kept growing worse. One morning a German corporal was found mutilated in a public urinal.

"And so they sent a man here. A very clever man," said the visitor in a purring voice. "We have a sobriquet for him. I don't know its origin. We call him KM.

"And KM," he continued, and his voice now grew serious and the facetious tone subsided and his fingers

ceased tapping, "KM has become, in this town, a symbol of absolute, uncontrollable Evil. Yes, my friend. This rather colourless little man, of a cultured background and decidedly urbane manners, has become a mythological monster. Hatred, you see, can become a passion so deep and categorical that it ceases to be passion: it becomes an instinct and a myth and a part of a race.

"KM, you see, ceased being merely a man whom they hated and wanted to kill. He became something above hatred and even above death. He became a being, almost a demigod, whose very nature was to pursue and be pursued; to kill and calmly await being killed. All the latent evil in this town flowed toward him as toward a magnet. The others, the ordinary soldiers of the occupation, were ignored. It was KM in whom all hate was crystallized and cradled. And yet almost no one had seen him. He never appeared in public. Descriptions of him varied curiously. And he is still here." The man paused and added, with a certain whimsicality: "You'll be seeing him before long, I should imagine, monsieur." A soft, dreamy smile played across his features. "Some say he is going a bit mad. Too old. Too many worries. But which of us, my friend, would dare to draw the line between vision and madness?"

Jean-Nicolas had been listening quietly and not without bewilderment. He asked: "And what is your own business here, monsieur, if I may ask?"

"That," he replied with a mingling of condescension and coquetry—"that, my friend, I shall leave to your imagination!"

"Would it be rude," said Jean-Nicolas, "to inquire your name?"

"Alas," sighed the visitor. "Forgive my manners. I failed to introduce myself. But no matter. The truth is: I have at present no real name."

And then a curious thing happened in the pudgy, rosy face. The urbanity broke apart. A look of uncontrollable

nausea appeared; the cheeks shook, the lips puckered. He seemed about to be sick, to collapse, to scream. A piercing suspicion shot through Jean-Nicolas' mind; but before he could grasp it, it was gone. The visitor's little fit had passed, and he slid back into a smooth condescension.

"No," he said. "I have no real identity. You will never discover who I am. Nor why I came to call on you. But, believe me, I have my reasons."

He sighed with a kind of sugary regret, and added: "But since we are on the subject, I might say this. I am quite aware, my dear boy, of who you are; of where you have come from; of where you go. . . . You are a romantic, my charming fellow. You thought you could defy the dragon in his cave. You thought you could climb the inaccessible mountain. No, no. The age of miracles has passed. You, as well as all of us, shall pay to the last drop of blood for your miscalculations, your false hopes. Believe me, my dear, there is only justice; and justice is only another name, a sobriquet, for that terrible, masked executioner. . . ."

He reached out his pink hand, and with a soft-clutching precision picked up his hat and the yellow copy of La Fontaine.

He rose. "Good-bye, my friend. Sleep well. Happy dreams." He began walking to the door.

Jean-Nicolas said suddenly on an impulse: "One more question, monsieur. Have you ever heard of a man hereabout named Robinson?"

He turned at the door, without any perceptible sign of surprise, and peered at Jean-Nicolas puckishly.

"Some of my friends, monsieur, choose to call me Robinson. A discreet little name, don't you agree?" He opened the door softly and disappeared down the corridor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was dusk when Jean-Nicolas awoke again. A plum-grey light filled the room. Instantly he recognized the familiar, sacklike fragrance, and a lingering scent of lavender. He blinked his eyes. Nothing had changed. The room was dim and hushed.

His mind began to clear. He remembered his visitor of the morning. He remembered him neither with fear nor despair, only with a calm alertness, an intensification of every instinct.

He looked at the door. He had forgotten to lock it; but nothing in the room had changed. There was an air of limbo in the breathless light, the stale aroma. Nothing would ever or could ever happen in this room.

And he felt a strange, painful weariness take possession of his body. The ache in his thigh and the throbbing in his arm, caused by the jump two nights ago, now reappeared.

He felt hungry and reached his arm to the little white bell.

Then he rose and walked to the window. Each leg muscle was aching; now a twitch of pain sprang from the instep.

A lean, dove-haired girl appeared in the doorway.

"*Thé complet*, please."

She remained motionless. Jean-Nicolas drew a hundred-franc note from his pocket and passed it to her. She bowed mechanically and retreated.

Jean-Nicolas leaned over and glanced into the street from behind the lace of the curtain.

Sunday evening had fallen; nothing was stirring; the ripple of wind had subsided. The leaves in the plane trees spread and glimmered, a derelict and dying bronze. He glanced at the church clock: ten minutes past seven.

The dove-haired girl returned and deposited a copper

tray on the table. She raised the coffee-pot and poured out a cup of ruddy apple-leaf tea.

"Milk? Sugar, monsieur?" Jean-Nicolas nodded. There was a single small grey block of sugar and a tiny black pitcher of milk. In a saucer lay two slices of black bread and a triangular cinnamon wafer.

"Shall I pour the milk, monsieur?"

"Thank you."

She bowed and scuffled away.

No sooner had she closed the door than a soft, loose double knock sounded.

Jean-Nicolas raised the cup and drank the hot flavourless tea. He felt it warming his throat and then his chest and then his stomach.

"Come in," he then called softly.

The door opened and two Germans in uniform entered.

"If you please, monsieur. You will accompany us to headquarters."

A strange, sighing quietness passed through the narrow room. A rather gentle solemnity filled Jean-Nicolas; he no longer felt tired. He no longer felt frightened; a cool, almost agreeable sense of utter detachment ran through him. He thought briefly of Robinson. The squat grey body appeared before him, slippery and amorphous as an oyster. Jean-Nicolas felt the room darkening. He slowly inhaled: the scent of lavender was still perceptible.

"One moment, please." Jean-Nicolas nodded politely to the soldiers and poured himself another cup of tea. "I am rather hungry; you'll pardon me!" He ate the damp cinnamon wafer and slipped the black bread into his pocket. Then he followed them.

The blue light from the mountains had descended and flooded St. Pierre de Rumilly. The narrow streets had assumed a labyrinthical air. The four great chestnut trees were a frozen, military blue and the row of little plane trees swam dimly, like ferns under water.

Now nothing whatever was left to remind Jean-Nicolas of his memories. Their removal from actuality was consummated. They regained, as he wandered between the two guards, their flavour of secrecy and consolation.

The three men crossed the square and entered a low grey building beside the *hôtel de ville*.

It had been once a café; now it was converted for the use of the soldiers. The walls of the room were of oil-darkened oak and there was a bit of dirty sawdust on the floor. Seven men in uniform were sitting at a long wooden table. Empty green glasses and bottles of beer covered the tables, and the amber trails of beer and dried foam lined the chestnut boards. The room was filled with the odour of stale beer and dirty boots.

The two guards led Jean-Nicolas to a small table in the corner. "You'll wait here, if you please, monsieur." No one appeared to have noticed his arrival. The two guards then joined the other seven at the long chestnut table.

They were all of them a little drunk.

"What would you like now, Benno? Three wishes," said one. "Supposing they'll come true. Three wishes."

"Come true," muttered another truculently. "Three wishes. Good. Very good."

"Three wishes," said Benno, a bronze-faced boy with sparkling teeth. "A juicy roast duckling, a soft feather bed, and a thing that is soft and juicy inside the bed!"

"Good, Benno. Bravo. And now you, Aloysius. What about you?"

"A farm in the Argentine. A few cows. A few sheep. That's all," said Aloysius. Aloysius was a fat, whitish man with a tapering skull.

"And you, Wolf?"

"Sleep," said Wolf. "And more sleep. And then still more sleep." Wolf was a dry, bony man of forty with silver-rimmed glasses.

They all grew quiet. Their faces shone like masks

through the watery evening light; some dried, some puffy, one or two fresh and young but nevertheless mask-like; all of them curiously anonymous and somehow all of them dead.

Over the chestnut table hung a boar's head on the wall, the snowy tusks piercing the half-light. An iron candelabra hung from the ceiling, and on a long shelf which ran the whole length of the wall glimmered empty green magnums of champagne, empty Chartreuse bottles, a brass casserole, and a great brass candlestick.

The seventh soldier, who was no more than a child, had not yet spoken. He sat with his head bowed over the table and was intently drawing patterns in the shallow beer pools with his pencil.

"What are you doing, little Hans?"

Little Hans looked up shyly.

"Doing your homework, little Hans?"

Little Hans shook his head, wide-eyed.

"You look tired, little Hans."

"Leave him alone, Wolf," said an older man.

"It's bedtime, little Hans."

Little Hans was blushing; his young red lips were beginning to tremble.

"Let me see," said Wolf, leaning over Hans' shoulder. "What have you been writing, little Hans?"

"Nothing special," murmured the boy. "Words. Nothing in particular."

"Words," said Wolf gently, staring over the boy's shoulder. "I see. Father. Mother. Trudi. Just words. There's no harm in it."

"The boy's homesick," said the older man. "Leave him alone."

"It is more than homesickness," said Wolf, leaning back. "Much more. You know it, Rittinghaus."

The boy remained speechless and wide-eyed, as though he were about to drown.

The others looked away again.

"What are you reading, Willy?"
"A letter, Waldemar."
"From whom?"
"From my sister in Frankfurt."
"Is she good-looking, Willy?"
"Not particularly."
"What does she say, Willy?"
"The usual things. Everything is ashes. Everything and everywhere. My sister's home too. The whole street where my sister lived, the Regensburgerstrasse, is a heap of ashes. They used to call it Frankfurt-on-the-Main. Now, my sister writes me, they call it Frankfurt-on-the Ash."

No one was listening. Willy's voice was a dreary, expressionless singsong.

"They are all leaving Frankfurt. No place to live. Leaving it for good. No place to come back to. Everything ashes."

"Shut up, Willy."

"Do you remember, Waldemar, how lovely it used to be, years ago, at Christmas time? The big Christmas tree in the middle of the square and the snow shining and the green lights burning and the bells and the singing? Do you remember, Waldemar?"

"Shut your mouth, Willy."

The street door opened and a young soldier, thickset and rosy-cheeked, came rushing in. "A group of enemy parachutists have been dropped near Annemasse!" He spoke with a Swabian accent.

"Annemasse," said one man apathetically. "Where's that?"

"Near Annecy," said another vaguely.

"Well, well," said a third.

They lapsed into silence.

Then Benno softly began to sing.

Maikaefer flieg,
Der Vater ist im Krieg.

"Stop singing, Benno."

"Why should I stop singing, Klaus?"

"You know why. Not now. Not that particular song, Benno."

Benno continued softly.

Die Mutter ist in Pommerland,
Pommerland ist abgebrannt.

"Stop singing!" screamed Klaus, suddenly hysterical. "Stop singing, God damn it, stop singing, stop singing!"

A door opened on the left of the room. A tall elderly man in blue civilian clothes entered and glared at them.

"Please. Please. Discipline, please. What is it, please?"

They remained silent. Their faces relapsed into anonymity.

"Very well, please," said the elderly man tensely. "Then please remain silent. Continue as you are."

He glanced toward Jean-Nicolas and came in soft steps to his table.

"If you will be so good, please, monsieur," he said. "Follow me, please. Yes. If you please."

Chapter Twenty-Three

JEAN-NICOLAS followed the man in civilian clothes down the hall and they came to a door marked with a white enamel plate. On the plate were engraved, in old-fashioned lettering, the words *Salle à manger*. Above the plate on a manila card hung the typewritten words: *Oberbefehlshaber*. · *Privat*. The second word was underscored three times.

The man in civilian clothes knocked once and then another two times in rapid succession. A voice answered in tones of fatigue:

"Yes. Come in."

The door opened and Jean-Nicolas entered alone.

He was standing in what had been a formal dining-room, highly decorated in the old style. The walls were panels of faded pink brocade framed in elaborate white woodwork and surmounted by gilt cornucopias. High overhead and filmy with dust hung three crystal chandeliers.

The room was growing dark. He could hardly see the little man who was sitting behind an enormous table at the distant end of the room.

The last ripple of light from the high windows was reflected on his spectacles; his eyes were two flat silvery discs. He didn't move. Jean-Nicolas waited. He looked lifeless and desiccated, and the idea struck Jean-Nicolas with a passing terror that he was not a man at all but an effigy.

A voice said: "Yes, monsieur."

Jean-Nicolas walked up to the table. He was overcome with surprise; the man seemed no larger than a child; but intensely old and indescribably withered. His skin was iron-hued and snowy flakes of hair floated over each ear.

The effect of surprise vanished the moment he spoke: he became merely an old and tired, old-fashioned gentleman.

"Sit down, if you please," he said, still fingering some yellow and blue papers.

A gilt Louis Quinze clock stood on the desk in front of him, and he glanced at this from time to time.

"I do not desire," he went on, "to interrogate you. You are half French, half Italian, I undestand. Very well."

He spoke in a thin, exhausted, highly cultivated voice. His French was deliberate and faultless. "Let us not waste time on details. You are not, I may indicate, a prisoner. Do you smoke?"

He removed his spectacles and placed them on the table. For the first time he now raised his eyes and

looked at Jean-Nicolas. The effect was startling. His eyes were filmed with a web of veins and couched in crêpe-like bags: their expression was one of overwhelming, almost spectral, indifference.

He lit a cigarette for Jean-Nicolas and then he said: "Now let us talk. Quite *ex officio*. You've been in Germany?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded with care, paused, and replied: "Before the war, monsieur."

"In Berlin?"

"Never Berlin. Ulm, Munich, Cologne."

"Very well." The *Oberbefehlshaber* leaned back in the blue-plush armchair. "Let me explain Germany to you. I have a pet theory. Forgive me, monsieur, if I intrude it. Perhaps it will not impress you as altogether original. No matter."

He glanced swiftly at Jean-Nicolas with a look in his eyes both infinitely remote and incredibly intimate. Jean-Nicolas felt that these old, weary eyes were reaching into the misty recesses of his own soul, with the horrifying adroitness of a nightmare. The old man coughed lightly and lowered his eyes again; then he continued.

"From century to century, monsieur, as one observes the fluctuations of history, it becomes apparent that various people at various times have risen to a peak of energy. The reasons for such a rise may be complex and numerous. But the fact itself is a platitude. Let me elaborate. During this peak, monsieur, which presumably can last from ten to a thousand years, their self-consciousness as a group is consolidated. Their competitive energy flowers. Some call it nationalism. But this word scarcely scratches the surface of what might be called the impulse toward supremacy. It has happened many times. It will continue to happen."

A large vein throbbed rhythmically in his right temple and was accentuated by the oblique dusklight. The throbbing grew more pronounced as the light receded.

His hands hung over the inkwell like finely spun lace. His gabardine uniform shone with a smooth, loose iridescence.

"In each age, monsieur, the most effective available resources have, quite naturally, been employed for attaining this supremacy. And likewise for displaying it, one might add. War in one form or another, of course, to attain it. Culture, law, adventure, splendour in one form or another, to display it. Perhaps, monsieur, you consider these premises too obvious to deserve mention. Certain people, however, fail sufficiently to consider the most elementary laws nowadays."

He coughed faintly and again drew his fingers over his eyelids, raising the withered pouches slightly and then spreading the fingers of each hand in a delicate, fanlike motion.

"England's ascent, as we all know, was remarkably painless and subtle. Now it is Germany's turn. Please don't misconstrue my attitude, monsieur. I desire neither to boast nor to persuade nor apologize. I merely propound. The modern age is horrible. That we all know. Or should know at least. Germany's only method of conquest—since Germany is neither rich nor vast nor even by world standards numerically imposing—Germany's method was necessarily one of studious control and tireless ingenuity. Some have chosen to call it terrorism and treachery. I shan't quibble. The reply is this: there was no other way. For Germany humanitarianism constituted a deadly peril, compromise an insidious trap, culture a mask. So there it is. It wasn't we, but history who chose our moment of supreme energy. It wasn't we who chose our methods, but geography, the progress of science, the domination of the machine. We appear cruel; it is the age which is cruel. We appear blind and brutal; it is the vast handicaps that beset us which have dictated our technique. History has used the Germans to reveal her new and—let's admit it frankly—

rather sinister personality. It is a thousand pities; but there you are. Do you imagine, for example, that I enjoy war? I abhor war. I am nauseated by war."

He glanced briefly and searchingly at Jean-Nicolas. The vein in his temple continued to throb rhythmically. A slight tension appeared in the muscles of his forehead, a quivering above the brows which gave his face a look of subdued anguish.

"May I continue? Doubtless you wonder why I am addressing you, monsieur. You are, for one thing, a good listener; you look intelligent, imaginative; you are a cosmopolitan; perhaps I have other reasons. No matter. The discourse is the thing. Let us continue. Where were we? Ah yes; machines.

"The age of destructive machines, so it seems, and paradoxically enough, monsieur, has brought in its trail an age of mysticism. A mysticism without precedent. A dynamic mysticism which restores to our view of mankind a sense of passion. A mysticism, one might assume, resulting from pain and obsession and terror; a faith in miracles, cults, a deep sense of unexplored and hidden things. No age has ever seen so much palpable, inescapable pain; mental, needless to say, as much as physical. From pain, monsieur, and from degradation, spring these golden legends, this sense of man's greatness."

Jean-Nicolas sat very still and watched him carefully. Dusk had saturated the room. The Louis Quinze clock still glimmered on the desk. The lacelike hands floated pale above the inkwell. The face had receded into darkness, and only the voice retained its clear and microscopical texture. But the ambiguity of the voice grew, if anything, more insistent.

The feeling of bewilderment grew in Jean-Nicolas. Again the notion occurred to him, but this time with a sense of strangeness and pity, that the old man was a thing inanimate; a terrible little doll.

"Let us consider our position," the *Oberbefehlshaber*

went on, his voice intent as a spider weaving a frail but faultless web: "War is destroying the beautiful body of Europe. Will it leave anything instead? Your reply, perhaps, is this: 'Bitterness, sickness, desolation.' But is that the whole truth? Can such a thing be possible? Aren't we all, you as well as we, in a deep sense better men now than we were five years ago? And why? Because history has made us aware. Awareness has made us grow. Growth has turned us into men of responsibility: and responsibility in turn has made us men of action. Suffering and fear have invigorated our souls. An age of heroes is returning." The old man's voice became trance-like; his eyes groped among the shadows.

He sighed, and grew silent. Darkness had almost obliterated the room. Only the Louis Quinze clock still caught an arrow of light, and the ticking of the clock sprang suddenly forth into the room.

Then the *Oberbefehlshaber* broke the silence once more.

"To suffer, monsieur. To know fear, despair, desolation in one's own heart and to feel the unconquerable hatred of others. To feel the closeness of death again and again. To know how fleeting are the awards of courage, how ironical and lonely the rewards of wisdom. That, my friend, is what it means to become an individual."

He rose. He was a tiny man, but a manœuvre of the shadows made him appear heavy-set and towering.

"You are probably wondering, monsieur, why I have chosen to arrest you merely to hurl a long tirade at you." He smiled; or rather, it was not a smile so much as a grin of despair, an ultimate kind of sarcasm. "It is not so simple as that, however. More and more, monsieur, I begin to see things from a great distance; with a perspective not of years or even generations, but of centuries and whole millennia of bloodshed and betrayal. Nothing that I can do or ever have done will make one iota of difference. . . .

"You may go," he said gently. "I am not customarily

a man of whims. But tonight I feel a strange recklessness; perhaps, monsieur, you have liberated a strain of poetry in me. . . . No matter. You are free to go. But I suggest you go quickly; you have an enemy"—and a curious flash of contempt, faintly tinged with irony, appeared in the old man's eyes—"you have an enemy in St. Pierre de Rumilly. . . . Farewell, monsieur. I hope I have not wearied you with my pointless chatter!"

He accompanied Jean-Nicolas to the door. "Another cigarette?" By the flicker of the match Jean-Nicolas saw his face in a new light: the wrinkles grew deep and the lips were drawn back from the teeth in a grin half savage, half hysterical.

"Thank you, monsieur," said Jean-Nicolas, and bowed.

"The satisfaction," sighed the *Oberbefehlshaber*, tossing the match through the half-open door, "was mine altogether."

"May I ask," said Jean-Nicolas with caution, "whom I have to thank?"

"Ah," sighed the old man. "I would gladly tell you. But the name would mean nothing to you: it is a long, rather antiquated name. Besides, it is of no consequence. Let us retain, life being what it is, a subtle mutual anonymity. In any case . . ." He held out his lacelike hand. "Farewell, monsieur. And *bon voyage!*"

Chapter Twenty-Four

NIGHT had fallen and the village square was lost in shadows. The café awning was rolled up again and the tables were empty. There were no lights at all, except, in the *hôtel de ville*, a faint blue glimmer in a second-floor window. The curfew was in effect and there was no one to be seen.

Jean-Nicolas walked down a side street marked "Rue Lamartine." It led eastward toward the Arve. Beyond

the village outskirts he could see the winding road to Bonneville and Cluses, a powdery crimson in the early night.

He was walking beside a garden wall and running his finger-tips slowly along the mossy plaster. The fragrance of fruit blossoms came floating over the wall, and the wall itself exhaled a dim air of crumbling stone and withered ivy.

Far ahead of him, at the end of the Rue Lamartine, he saw three figures passing; three shadows aimlessly and almost imperceptibly passing through a gap of moonlight, turning, glancing, and then gone. A flush of warning passed through his veins—so calm and so punctual that it was almost reassuring.

A half-open gateway stood on his right; he entered.

Above his head floated a veil of pear blossoms. Spring came late to St. Pierre de Rumilly. The petals were still falling. Jean-Nicolas was standing in a courtyard dappled with fruit trees; the lawn beneath the trees was littered with petals, the ground between the shadows shone bright like snow. There was the soundlessness and stealth of snow in the pear petals falling. He wandered through the trees. In a soft patch of nightlight near his feet lay a pair of garden shears and a large pair of gloves, and a basket still full of weeds pulled out by the root. Everywhere hung the stealthy fragrance.

He heard a distant purring. He looked up but saw nothing. And he heard the purr grow steady and widen and linger and then slowly dissolve in the mountain night.

This, thought Jean-Nicolas with a sudden onrush of surprise, this is the real Europe, the Europe of the war.

It was not without beauty. A great silence had come. A silence and darkness had fallen on everything and had penetrated everything so that even the textures and flavours were purified. The noise and the lights and the

odours of the machine had gone out of the night. The smell of petrol and oil had gone and the delicate pungent smell of rain and earth and shrubs and spicy nights was filling the towns. A medieval greyness had crept over the buildings. An air of seclusion had returned to the countryside. It was not without a strange grey beauty, but it was the beauty of paralysis; there was a sense of an inner thundering. Through the breathless, cataleptic silence of the garden he could hear it. Through the darkness of the village he could feel it.

The purr of planes came nearer again; it was impossible to say from which direction. In the distance he heard a sound of gunfire. Then the purr flattened imperceptibly into silence, like rings in a pool.

He glanced through the gateway back into the street. There was no one. The calm and the emptiness were so pervasive that the pang of danger in him subsided entirely; and he stepped into the street again. The scent of pear blossoms vanished. Another scent surrounded him: a cool, faintly sulphurous emanation, like the smell of gunpowder.

He walked down the street toward the open country. It was wholly deserted; not even the street patrol or a sentinel was visible in the outskirts. He climbed back toward the crossroads where Quivar said he would wait. He saw the two roads crossing from a distance, and the sentry hut. Two German soldiers stood quietly talking in the middle of the road. He kept to the shrubby hillside and climbed up and up. Once he thought he heard a sound of footsteps in the thicket, and called softly: "Quivar." There was no reply and he climbed on higher. He could see the steeple of the Church of St. Ursule from the hillside, piercing the night sky, and beneath it the huddle of village roofs, quite dark but shining faintly here and there where the shingles or a weather-cock caught the emerging moonlight. A feeling of human closeness and a last pang of recollection came over him and then

drifted away; he walked on. The slope of the hill flattened as he approached the top, and a faint alpine breeze came up from the south.

There was a dark, crested shadow on the ground not far away, among the crevices. He called again: "Quivar." But again there was no reply.

And his new loneliness took on the impact, simultaneously, of a sickness and a strength. He knew that he must hurry on. He had only two more nights in which to reach Monthey: two more nights and no one to guide him.

Now he could see St. Pierre de Rumilly behind him, black and furry. Below to the east he could see the shadowy angles of the factories of Bonneville. That way, he knew, lay his direction. Step by step he followed the ripple of the hillside.

Once again came the velvety purr of the motors. He looked up. Still he saw nothing. It came closer and widened as before, but this time lower, and this time there was a threatening nearness in the sound; and then a sound of closing in and a distant hissing. Again there was the sound of gunfire, but this time sharper, spectacularly clear.

Jean-Nicolas looked down at Bonneville. The town had quietly burst into flames. Without any warning and without transition the gently angled darkness had grown liquid and wavering; it had blossomed into twenty or thirty blazing chrysanthemums. The explosions continued for several minutes and then gradually ceased. The purr of the planes had vanished. But the flames continued and were strangely uniform, and all pointed westward like waves in a sea, and only here and there a tongue of fire shot skyward momentarily.

He kept on toward the east and toward the shine of the river Arve. The water flowed tranquil and black below him until he followed a bend in the hill: and then he saw the wild exultation of the flames close and clear,

and he heard their faint singing, and saw them split and lie shuddering in the quick-flowing river.

Shapes of men and animals were moving far below. They were leaving the town and climbing the hill. It was a slow caravan of silhouettes and passed, with a curiously deliberate air, along the shore and then behind a crest of wood, and then still more slowly up the slope that overlooked the burning town.

Now the fire was smooth and steady and patient, and Jean-Nicolas could see the shapes of the separate buildings. Black shadows were dancing on the walls of the cathedral. Down by the water's edge, beyond the reach of the flames, he could see the crouching shapes of men bearing the wounded.

Several horses, with their bodies sheathed in flame, streamed past the procession and ran toward the water; he could hear them screaming and then saw them plunging through the blackness into the river.

He heard voices near by. Through the bushes emerged a group of silhouettes, and they came to a halt at his side and glanced at him vaguely and stared down at the flames.

"Look: look," a woman kept saying. "Just look."

Near the woman stood a big, clumsy-shaped boy, and beside him a man who looked and smelled like a swineherd. The woman, as Jean-Nicolas now saw, was a nun. "Look," she kept saying. "Just look." . The light was playing faintly on her white dry face.

"I never thought it would happen up here," said the swineherd. "So high. Never."

"So high," repeated the boy in a dazed singsong voice. He was wearing a long faded smock, somewhat like a nightgown. Jean-Nicolas could hear in his voice that he was an idiot.

"Such a small town, too," said the nun. "So out of the way, we thought."

"So small," echoed the fool.

"The cathedral," said the swineherd. "And the museum of coaches. Think of it."

Their voices and the look in their eyes seemed oddly unreal to Jean-Nicolas. Their words seemed primitive and stilted, as though in the splendour and magnitude of the calamity they had not yet found their bearings and did not yet feel grief or rage.

"The infirmary," said the nun. "The library with those wonderful books."

"Wonderful books," whispered the fool.

"It seems incredible," said the swineherd, drawing his old brown hand over his forehead. "Never, somehow, did we in Bonneville expect such a thing to happen to us. There it is. Look."

"Incredible," echoed the nun in tones of grief. "Never. To us. Such a thing."

The fool had begun to cry.

"Don't cry, my dear," said the nun wearily.

"They'll build it back again," said the swineherd vaguely. "Splendid modern buildings. Some day."

"The anïmals," sobbed the fool. "Where are all the animals?"

"Don't cry, Étienne," whispered the nun. "Soon all will be as before."

"The birds?" said the fool, still sobbing softly and running his hands along his faded smock. "The squirrels?"

"Yes, my dear," said the nun absently and mechanically, and the boy stopped sobbing quite abruptly. All three continued to stare in fascinated silence. The flames had subsided into an azure pool. The fool's eyes shone; tears still clung to his cheeks, but a look of repose and almost pleasure had come to his face. The nun stood, hands folded, her face white and dry and infinitely weary. The swineherd kept scratching his shaggy head and now and then glanced at Jean-Nicolas, sheepish and puzzled.

Chapter Twenty-Five

He crept on through the trees, watching the flames of Bonneville dance and tremble along the trunks. And then as he walked on the woods slowly deepened, and the flames of Bonneville grew dim and intermittent; he could see their glimmering only among the upper boughs, and then on the tallest of the pine trees only. Then they died and the flaming town lay hidden; only when he looked at the sky behind him he still saw a soft sea-haze of light over the distant valley of the Arve.

He drew his hand over his eyes. His face was dripping with sweat.

Where he was going he had quite forgotten, and where he had just been he could remember only by an effort, and as a kind of hallucination. He remembered the two slivers of black bread he had taken in the hotel: he reached into his pocket. They had crumbled, but he ate them, crumb by crumb, scrupulously, without relish. Now the mosquitoes came crowding as he entered the moist and breezeless valley. The heat grew. thicker; he felt the sweat trickling under his shirt.

The moon appeared and the Alps shone with a brittle, paralysed magnificence. Far behind him he recognized the three ascending peaks: the Pointe d'Andey, the Pointe de Jallouvre and the Pointe-Percée. But the flawless culmination of Mont Blanc had vanished, and beyond the Pointe-Percée flowed only the limitless sky, with the stars suspended in its terrible currents like algae, a shivering and elemental green, incredibly frail in their structure and monstrous in their multitude. Jean-Nicolas walked on and the dry sweet spice of pines fell away; the rushy smell of willow trees came up from the valley. In the distance, dim, circuitous, he thought he could hear the whimpering of a stream.

Suddenly he felt more tired than he had ever felt

before. He felt so tired that the pain in his thigh and the throbbing in his arm and the stinging blisters in his ankles all melted together in a continuing rhythm which bordered on vertigo. His eyes grew filmy. His hearing grew feverishly acute. And the constant effort of apprehension began to tell at last, it left his mind so worn that the world grew transfigured, all shapes and sounds slid forth into a new dimension: nothing remained concrete, everything grew equivocal, penumbral.

He leaned over and massaged his hip and then the calves of his legs. He tipped back his water bottle and drank; and then sprinkled the remaining drops on his forehead.

He looked up. The mountain sky was saturated with little clouds, a thousand arrowy fragments silvered like the scales of some colossal fish.

There was a rustling among the shrubs. He took out his flashlight and pressed it. A cat was crouching among the twigs, wild and scrawny with hunger. It stared at him, dazed by the fiery eye; then recoiled and lurched into the thicket.

Then he realized that he was standing beside a small pool of water. He knelt down to bathe his face. But he saw that the water was covered with an iridescent red veneer; it smelled of death.

And a sense of incredulity, almost trancelike, swept over him. Reflected in the maroon-tinted water hung his own face, bright against a well of darkness. The curly dark hair, the shining eyes, the suburned face with the light scar above the brow—those were his own, and familiar. But a curious, calm intensity in the expression was new; was alien and, for an instant, terrifying. It was the gaze of an animal: the calm black stare of the instincts.

And he thought: how strange it was, this perpetual wandering in the darkness. It had sharpened all his senses. He had learned, as it were, to see with his ears

and his nose and his skin. He could smell the approach of a path or a brook or a massif. He could hear the thickening or thinning of the woods, he could hear the ground rising into a hill or falling into a valley. His skin had grown electrically sensitive to the approach of danger: uncertainty underfoot, a twig snapping in the distance, a meaningful hush. He felt like an animal, all the hidden and nameless capacities of man had flowered in the darkness, they grew into talents, they acquired the perfection of an instrument. His tread had become the tread of a lynx, and he had learned to guess through a feline telepathy what passions, what pangs of fury or alarm passed through the men beside him. His vision of men had altered; it had grown nocturnal. The mission he was performing, the search for treachery, had grown into something deeper than the search for one particular man or one particular act. As he scrutinized one face after another, he learned to detect, through the darkness, the presence of a deeper kind of treachery in men; and with his heart and blood, not with his mind, he could discern the inner, invisible rot which was destroying them.

And as he knelt there, in the soundless shell of the mountains, the words returned to him: *Try to localize the decay. Try to identify the poison.* . . . Two nights out of four had elapsed; was his mission completed? And another phrase returned: *Everything you do will be fateful.* . . .

Then, as he gazed into the water, a breath of wind passed. The water broke into a pale undulation: his face broke and vanished. Where his face had lain mirrored something else now grew visible; a hovering shell of red, dimly patterned, like the palm of a hand. Jean-Nicolas stared more closely. What he felt was a pang of horror, curiously coupled with a grave, almost meditative detachment. A human body lay in the water, face down, huge and dark. Jean-Nicolas drew back and rose. He looked up at the stars. With the aid of their calm,

tremendous perspective he gradually shook off the vision in the pool; and hurried on through the trees.

He heard the sound of voices. The trees grew thin: he could see the moonlight fall on a clearing between the two hillsides. At the end of the clearing shone the white low walls of a farmhouse, and he could see the barns beyond, and near by, in a little hollow among some willows, he could see the silhouette of a well against the silvery fleece of the hillside. It was from the well that the voices came. Scarcely discernible at first, but then slowly dissociating themselves from the shadow of the willows, he could see the shapes of men. He stood and listened. He saw that there were three; one, the largest of the three, was leaning lazily against the dark cylinder of the well, and the second was seated on the edge, and the third was crouching on the ground beside them. The one who was leaning seemed to be talking, but so softly that Jean-Nicolas could not tell what language it was. There was a pause, and then the crouching one said something in a vague, disparaging murmur. Then the sitting one spoke sharply and clearly, and it was evidently German they were speaking, but a weird, rather guttural German, neither the German of a Frenchman nor the German of an Italian nor any kind of German Jean-Nicolas had ever heard.

He watched them with a growing uneasiness. They looked frozen, petrified by the cold white light. He could not hear their words and he could scarcely see their faces; yet even in the fabric of their shadows he detected a cat-like desolation.

Then the crouching one seemed to whisper and Jean-Nicolas saw his hand moving; and they all grew silent and their silhouetted heads had turned, and Jean-Nicolas then knew that they had seen him. He realized that he was standing in the full white glare of the moonlight. They stared at him in silence; and the leaning one moved swiftly and his hand sprang forth from his waist: Jean-

Nicolas recognized the dim, unmistakable glint of a revolver.

The shots rang out, two of them, and Jean-Nicolas heard the hiss of air and the queer, hoarse whistle of the willow leaves beside him. He fell.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"THERE," one of them said softly, standing above Jean-Nicolas: this was the voice of the crouching one. "There, there. It is a pity. A pity. But there it is."

Another one was kneeling beside Jean-Nicolas: Jean-Nicolas could feel the head close above his own and could smell the warm, bitter breath.

"Is he dead?" said the third one, standing at a distance. This was the voice of the one who had been sitting.

There was no reply, and Jean-Nicolas could feel the breath of the man draw closer; he could feel the baleful, searching intimacy of the man's face staring into his own.

"Well, is he dead?" the third one repeated, in his odd, lilting German.

"It is not impossible," said the kneeling one thoughtfully.

"Then he is dead?"

"Perhaps."

"Death is not a perhaps. Death is a yes or no. . . . Shoot him again, you from Macedonia."

"Is it the right man? Are you sure?" said the little man near by.

There was a brief pause. "It is not certain," said the kneeling one, in a curiously gentle tone.

"Certain enough," said the distant one. "Don't run any risks. Go ahead, you from Macedonia. Kill him."

"Patience," said the kneeling one. "Patience, Arab."

"Perhaps he is pretending," said the little man standing near by.

"Wait," said Jean-Nicolas quietly, and opened his eyes. "Wait. Don't kill a friend."

"Very well," said the Macedonian quite placidly. "Why didn't you speak before?"

"Kill him," said the Arab. "Shoot him. Strangle him."

"Let the man speak," said the third one, the little mild one standing near by. This one spoke with the weirdest accent of all, a concoction of Oriental groans and hisses, almost unintelligible. "Speak, stranger. Where do you come from?"

Jean-Nicolas drew a deep breath. "I've come from Annecy," he whispered.

"The man is manifestly playing for time," said the Arab. "Shoot him, you from Macedonia."

"Wait," said the Macedonian. "Patience. Discretion." Then he said to Jean-Nicolas: "You speak good German. Are you a German?"

Jean-Nicolas shook his head. He saw the Macedonian's curly blond head shine above him and the enigmatic smile in his eyes.

"I am on your side; I am one of you," said Jean-Nicolas. His right arm was aching from the quick, instinctive fall and he could still hear the hissing of the bullet in his ears; but now he knew that he was unhurt.

"Are you hurt?"

"I think not."

"You fell rather artistically, I must say. You should go on the stage," said the Macedonian admiringly.

"Do you believe him?" said the Arab. . . . "Shoot him. Eliminate him."

The Macedonian looked at him dryly and murmured: "Shut your mouth, Arab. A wise man neither believes nor disbelieves, but waits."

"I see," said the Arab, with a sudden, tense insinuation in his voice. "I see. I see."

"Careful," said the mild little Oriental anxiously.

"No quarrels among friends. This man is a friend. You are a friend, aren't you? What is your name, in that case?"

"Spinelli," said Jean-Nicolas.

"And country?"

"Sardinia," said Jean-Nicolas calmly.

A quick glance passed between the three men. A look of command, swift as lightning, in the eyes of the Macedonian; a sly, servile, ironical look of connivance in the eyes of the other two.

"Such names as exist in this world," said the Arab with a sigh. "Such places."

"Well, get up, my friend," said the Macedonian. Then he shook Jean-Nicolas by the hand and said: "My name is Simon Karastoyanoff. And this bloodthirsty one is an Arab, needless to say. Tell him your name," he said, turning to the Arab.

"Dr. Abdullah Ali Arache," said the Arab.

"You heard him? Say it again, please: it is full of a strange, ferocious music. And I like that doctor. A good touch, that doctor, eh? He is, I fear, a bit of a snob."

"Not a snob, if you please," said the Arab with indignation. "Snob is absurd. You know my views."

"An intellectual left-wing Mohammedan snob," said the blond Macedonian, smiling all the while with his eyes. Then he looked tenderly at the little sloe-eyed Oriental and placed his huge arm over the little man's shoulder. "And this one comes from Annam. His name is even more eerie and more elegant than the Arab's. Tell the stranger your name, my friend."

The little sloe-eyed man said: "Ngo Dihn Tiuh."

"There," said the Macedonian admiringly. "Have you ever heard such a name? Such queerness. Such elegance. It sounds like water bubbling."

They were walking back to the well. "Speaking of water bubbling," whispered the little Annamese; "I

feel an intensity of thirst. Is there water in the well, do you think?"

The great Macedonian looked down into the well and stirred the iron chain from which the bucket was hanging. "I see water. Turn the handle, Dr. Abdullah."

The Arab slowly began to turn the handle. The rusty chain squeaked as it wound on the wooden axle and there was a faint stirring and trickling from the bottom of the well.

"Keep turning, Dr. Abdullah."

"It's stiff. It's very rusty," said the Arab with petulance. He was an austere and forbidding, yet faintly ludicrous type of man. He wore a blue jersey horizontally striped, and shabby white duck trousers, and a blue *béret*; it was a tattered parody of a Riviera sportsman's outfit. His skin was dark and oily and pock-marked.

"No one has drunk from this well for many a month," said the Macedonian. "Of that I am sure."

"Perhaps it's poisoned," suggested the Annamese.

"Is the bucket coming?" asked the Arab.

"Slowly," said the Macedonian. "Slowly. I see it shining."

The Annamese was leaning with solicitude over the side of the well. "Yes, I see it too. Keep turning, Dr. Abdullah, be so good. Yes, I see it. Full of water. I can even smell the water; do you smell it, stranger?" He looked coyly at Jean-Nicolas with his black tilted eyes. He spoke German in a weird, velvety accent. "I can hardly wait . . . I can hear it dripping. . . . Keep right on turning, Dr. Abdullah."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

SUDDENLY they heard the chain creak ominously, and then it broke and leapt and coiled around the wooden axle; and they heard the metal bucket splash into the water.

"Idiot," cried the Annamese in high, piercing tones.

"It's not my fault," said the Arab indignantly, leaning over the edge of the well.

"The chain was old and rusty," said Jean-Nicolas tactfully.

"It hadn't been used for years," said the Macedonian.

All four leaned over and looked into the well. A cool green subterranean fragrance rose into the heat of the night. "I still feel an intensity of thirst," said the man from Annam reproachfully.

"So do I," said the Arab with severity. "Be quiet, Ngo Dihn Tiuh. Cease tantalizing us."

All four kept staring into the dark cool hollow.

"My throat is aching," complained the Annamese. "There is nothing like a drink of cool, fresh, rippling water."

"Please, Ngo Dihn Tiuh. Contain yourself. Cease indulging your appetites," declared the Arab.

The Macedonian had silently stripped his clothes and now he was straddling the mossy wall and feeling for a foothold inside the well, and then he lowered himself slowly, clinging to the edge with his hands. "There. The chain," he muttered. "Hold on to the handle, all three of you. There. Now slowly. That's right. Slow now. Good." The other three could see his big blond head glimmer in the blackness of the well. He was almost out of sight; and they could hear the creak and tug of the chain.

"What if it breaks again?" demanded the Annamese.

"He will fall and break his neck," said the Arab crisply.

"And we'll still be thirsty," said the Annamese mournfully. "Hurry up," he called down into the well, and the echo came back. Far down in the shadows they could see the Macedonian like a white ghost, and they heard a soft dipping motion in the water. Then there was a tug and

the Macedonian called back: "Now pull, all three of you."

They turned the handle slowly, and soon they saw the Macedonian's enormous head emerge from the well, and then his white body, one hand clinging to the chain and the other holding the rusty bucket, and his feet spread wide and clinging to the rough black walls of the well.

"Very good," said the Arab, not without irony. "You have something of the hero in you still, I see. Well, let's have a drink. Who'll be first? We have nothing to lose. You, Sardinian?" He leered at Jean-Nicolas politely and held out the bucket.

There was a curious air of irresponsibility and mutual contempt among the three men. There was a vagrant, dissolute tone in everything they said. Gradually the meaning of this grew apparent to Jean-Nicolas. But then, as he watched them, a new and more horrifying suspicion appeared on the fringes of his mind. He was not yet sure what it was. There was something in the moonlit slope and the darkness of the well; something of an occult intention in the presence of these three; something in his own heart which filled him with a sense of utter decay. For an instant he thought of turning and running for his life.

He drank and passed the bucket on to the Macedonian.

"How was it," he casually asked him, "working for the Germans?"

"Oh," said the Macedonian airily, "not good, not bad. Nothing much one way or the other, until the bastards began losing, and then worse food, worse pay, worse beds, worse prostitutes, worse everything. Everybody began to desert just about then, you see. There are thousands like us all over France. In the Balkans too, mind you. In Italy. In Russia. Everywhere. Thousands. Poor devils like us. Scooped together from the prison camps to build walls and roads and fortresses for the bastards.

What's left for us? Nothing. What can we do about it? Nothing."

"Have you been here long?" said Jean-Nicolas quietly. "In this part of the country?"

"Two months. Three months," grunted the Macedonian.

"And what do you do?"

"What do we do?" The Macedonian looked at him with sudden concentration; with a bold, playful defiance. "What do we do? Listen, Sardinian. I know nothing about you. But I like your looks. I like the look in your eyes. Listen. Let me tell you something. You ask, what do we do? I reply, anything we're told to do. Can we help it? Do you blame us? . . . We do what we're told. We're not responsible. It's a job, like mending shoes or baking bread. That's all." His voice grew ardent. "That's all. . . . We're still normal men. Our souls are untouched." He smiled: a slow, appalling smile.

He stood dripping in the moonlight and raised the bucket to his lips again. He was a massive fellow, built like a discus thrower, with smooth flowing muscles immense at the shoulders and resilient at the hips.

The Arab and the Annamese had been listening to the Macedonian with bewilderment. They glanced at one another and shrugged their shoulders; then they too took the bucket and drank.

"And now," said the little Annamese, when they all had finished drinking from the bucket; "what shall we do now?"

"Sleep," said the Macedonian. "What else is there to do?"

The Annamese, disconcerted, then turned to the Arab. "Let us be edifying, Dr. Abdullah. Let us talk."

"Talk of what?"

"Of Europe. Of love. Of God," said the Annamese.

They all sat down on the ground, leaning their backs against the well, facing in different directions.

"Europe no longer exists," said the Arab dryly. "God never did exist. Only love is left. And what on earth remains to be said about love?"

"What is love?" inquired the Annamese. "Tell me. What is it?"

There was something in the air which still puzzled Jean-Nicolas. There was an air of innuendo, of things unsaid, among these three. Jean-Nicolas thought again of the Macedonian's white shape groping in the darkness of the well.

"What is love?" repeated the Annamese. "There are a thousand kinds. How can one speak of love when there are a thousand different kinds?"

"There is love for a night," said the Macedonian, "and love for a lifetime."

"There is love for one's God and love for one's race," said the Arab.

"I thought you said that God had ceased to exist, Dr. Abdullah?"

"There are many Gods," explained the Arab. "Some living, some dying, some dead for ever and some dead but re-arising. It is only the European God who is truly, irrevocably, dead."

The Macedonian sat leaning against the well with his great white arms uplifted and folded together over the top of his head, and his legs spread out straight and wide apart. He kept glancing at his great muscles with a kind of glazed admiration.

A dreamy look came over him; his grey, cool, cunning eyes rose and came to rest on Jean-Nicolas with an air of reminiscence, tinged with a grief so deeply buried and so long concealed that its emergence had a raw, shocking quality.

"There is love which creates," resumed the Annamese, "and love which destroys."

"There is the love of the heart and the heart alone," said the Macedonian, "and there is the love of the penis."

"There is love for one's opposite," hinted the Arab with an air of cunning, "and love for one's own image."

"There is the love for the sea," said the Annamese, "and the love for the mountain."

"And let me tell you," said the Macedonian, "there is a love which drives a man into the dark corners of a street night after night, and obsesses his mind with loathsome memories, and gnaws at his soul like a cancer."

"Love is a thing, above all, of the spirit," argued the Annamese gently. "Love is a faith."

"No," said the Arab. "Love is a thing of the mind. Love is a practical philosophy."

"Both of you," said the Macedonian with sudden passion, "are fools. . . . We sit here and speak of love. Is it not truly ironical, my friends? Love, love, which is the only word in our vocabulary that matters to us; the only thing in our bodies that keeps us alive. And we, who are specialists in death, have the audacity to speak of love! Oh listen to me, my friends! We thought we could kill, and escape the guilt. We thought we were merely obeying orders. We were wrong! It is ourselves, my friends, we have been murdéring."

He paused; and then with a curious weariness he added: "And we speak of love, my friends! We speak of love two hours after we have killed a poor wretch of a negro. We speak about love to the very man we were trying to kill an hour ago. . . . Is life not truly ironical? We sit and toy with him, and speak of love while we are calmly waiting for the moment when we shall kill him. . . ."

The other two were watching the Macedonian with a vague, helpless stare of amazement. They stole a furtive look at Jean-Nicolas. No one dared to move.

"You think it odd," said the Macedonian, gazing at Jean-Nicolas with the desolate yearning of a trapped animal, "that I should speak like this? You think, perhaps, it is a prayer for forgiveness? A final stab at

redemption? No, no. We are lost, we are lost. . . . And now let us sleep." There was a note of command in his voice. The Arab and the Annamese lay down silently in the dark grasses.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A ROW of huge, heavily indented crags ran along the entire length of the eastern horizon. The land had grown unreal. The smooth pine-covered slopes were gone, and the earth, in a kind of noiseless paroxysm, had shaken off its cover of trees and violently contracted. Where wooded curves had lain before, there were treeless furrows and ravines. The moon was bright and yet, instead of illuminating the great rocks above, it only served to obscure them. Their surface, striated and salmon-coloured, hung like a film in front of the sky; and their distant outlines were scarcely perceptible.

Jean-Nicolas kept climbing. His legs were leaden with weariness and aching. Several times during this long climb his calves grew rigid with a muscular cramp and he sat on the ground to knead the frozen muscles. Once or twice he struck a match and glanced at his map. The great hill in front of him he knew was the Mole. And beyond it lay St. Jeoire and Viuz-en-Sallaz. These he knew must be avoided; they lay on the road to Annemasse and were heavily guarded.

As he approached, the great crest of rocks seemed to waver and shift and retreat, it seemed, into a glow of measureless distance. Again the scent of the pine woods began. The great valley on his left curved around in a semicircle and then split into three narrow wooded convexities. He made his way over the massive rocks and crept on. Then the ground broke. He stood on the edge of a precipice.

He looked toward the peak of the Mole; it had gone.

Nothing but the flood of forest rose in front of him and below him.

Then he knew he had lost his way entirely. The night changed its texture. The forest grew larger and darker and stiller. The dry sound of the dropping of a twig beside him and then the sudden whirring of a small night-bird made him feel that the whole forest was coming alive; that the forest was imperceptibly extending its domain and was prowling gigantically westward through the darkness. The stars shed their microscopical sheen and fell into their true, titanic dimensions. The silence became not an absence but a presence. He heard nothing but the sound of his breath as he stood there. He drew back from the deep break in the hill and crept step by step around the lower bend. Here a stony path appeared. He continued until once more the view opened and the landscape altered. Far below him a small mountain lake lay shining.

It lay cupped in the mountains, a disc of blue glass reflecting a sudden tranquillity in the stars. The heat had grown heavy; the curving range cut off the wind.

The sky was so swarming, the night was so warm, the lake so smooth and the air so entirely drained of the familiar: it might have been the equatorial line he was crossing, or the slopes of Borneo. A thin black bird swept past, shaped like a bittern but swifter in its flight. He walked on a few steps. And then, with the abruptness of a stereopticon, Europe slid before him once again.

The silhouette of a small castle with one turret projecting rose from the edge of the lake. It rose gently, attentively, human as a hand with one finger upraised and resting on the waveless surface of the lake. Jean-Nicolas stood still and listened, expecting to hear something; a bell ringing perhaps, or the lapping of oars. But there was no sound; for several seconds there was no sound at all.

Then he heard it; the crisp familiar purr of the planes.

They were out of sight, but he could tell the direction of the sound. They approached and the purr fell into separate fragments. It became a shivering echo. It swung away and vanished and another came; and that too vanished. Another wave passed in the northern distance; and then to the south a fourth and a fifth. Then came a sputter of sound and a sudden widening and a wild, hugging, disintegrating roar, and he saw a streak of fire high over the lake; it floated and swooped ever so leisurely downward, swelling as it fell, and an anchor of fire rose slowly toward it in the lake, moving across the water in electrical harmony to join it, and then finally joined it. The flames grew separate and deliberate now as the burning fuselage lay floating on the lake.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The plane was still burning as Jean-Nicolas approached the castle. The light from the flames fell on the shingled turret. A high stone wall surrounded the park, but there was a massive iron screen at the gateway and through the screen he could see the firelight moving in ripples across the façade. It was a small eighteenth-century château, built of rose-coloured bricks and with a roof of mosaic-patterned slates. There were shutters of pale green, all of them closed. Veins of rain below the eaves and the faint pattern of efflorescence had discoloured the bricks. The shingles were askew and the shutters were faded and cracked. All of this he could see by the light of the flames which shone with a steady mercurial intensity, like white-hot steel.

He looked through the iron screen for some sign of life. No one was to be seen. Cautiously he turned the knob in the small pedestrian's gate beside the enormous iron gates of the drive. The gate slowly opened and he stepped inside into the park.

The place was utterly deserted. The lawn lay tawny and tufted with neglect. It sloped down to the water, and along the water's edge ran a stone balustrade, silhouetted with unnatural precision against the radiance from the lake. He walked along the drive toward the château. The flames were flooding the park with light, but a light so liquid and penetrating that it seemed to emanate, not from the fire, but from the foliage and the fountain and the statues themselves. There was a statue of a fleeing Daphne sprouting with laurel leaves, and another of a fleeing Actaeon torn by the hounds; both were seized and strangely reanimated by the light of the flames. A swarm of white arrows played along the beeches and elms. The stagnant water in the fountain shone like ice, and the château seemed to wither into ashes under the blinding impact of light. The black bones of the fuselage began to sink slowly into the lake; but the flames still kept rising from the floating oil.

Jean-Nicolas followed a path that led around the side of the château and past a duck pond toward the stables. On his right a flight of steps led into a formal garden, and there was a transitory scent of roses. Then he saw the full-blown roses on the aisles of rose-bushes. They also hung frozen in the catastrophic light.

There was no trace of life anywhere, and when he touched the bell beside the kitchen entrance he heard, very dimly, the echo of the bell far within; but no voice and no footsteps; the door opened without effort.

He passed through the servants' hall. A swinging door on the right opened into the kitchen. The aluminium pots and pans hung in rows on the wall, bright with parallel shudders of brilliance which fell through the closed shutters. The door on the left opened into the pantry and he passed into the dining-room. A great tapestry covered the wall, and Jean-Nicolas could see the classic shadows of nymphs and warriors behind a ladder of light that sprang through the jalousies. He could see

the glimmer of a silver tea-service on the sideboard, transfixed by stilettos of light.

Then he entered the drawing-room.

This was a long room with a row of windows on the left. From the wall on his right hung the portraits of ancestors, with a stray fan or farthingale stung by the light. Along the window hung a ripple of taffeta. There was a faint breeze; one of the windows hung open. There was a rustling of taffeta and once or twice a lingering tinkle among the chandeliers. Shelves of books lined the walls of the further end of the room, and below the books stood an enormous table with legs ornately carved. In a high embroidered chair behind the table sat a woman, quite immobile, with her hands folded motionless on the table.

Jean-Nicolas stood still. Was she sleeping? Was she living? He began to retreat.

A voice floated across the room. "Please come closer. . . . I can't see you."

Then the voice added: "Who are you, please?"

Jean-Nicolas saw that a small candle was burning on the table. He approached. The candlelight swayed in the entering breeze and cast a tremor on the woman's face and on the small bronze bust that stood beside her on the table. On one side of the table lay a heap of old newspapers, and in front of the woman a pack of cards lay spread. The wavering of the candlelight created on her face a ceaseless, subtly appalling change of expression.

"It's so dark here," she complained, in an old and arrogant voice. "They've cut off the electricity and the gas. Nothing but candles. Please," she commanded, "come closer. I can hardly see you. Who are you?"

Jean-Nicolas told her. Then he told her how he had lost his way.

"Then you're not a German?"

"No, madame," said Jean-Nicolas.

"That plane burning outside," she said wearily. "Is that one of the German planes?"

He said he didn't know: an English bomber perhaps, he said.

She continued to stare at Jean-Nicolas. One moment the shifting candlelight cast an illusory smile on her features, which gave way a moment later to a fleeting air of ferocity.

"Sit down," she commanded. "Well, what's happening in the world?"

He told her what he knew. He told her something about Russia, something about Monte Cassino; then something about the bombing of the German cities.

She scarcely seemed interested. She was overwhelmingly old. Her white hair was cut short like a man's and it had a tough, wiry, lustreless texture, like a fox-terrier's. There was in her features a certain aquiline distinction, but her glance was bitter and cold and her voice had something hard, masculine, impersonal. "You're tired, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Jean-Nicolas. He added, "May I sleep here, madame?"

She shrugged her shoulders and leaned across the table and pressed a bell. Then Jean-Nicolas saw that she was an invalid, and he caught sight of the wheel chair and the crutches in the shadow behind the table. "Félicien will take you into the cellar. This happens," she added tartly, "every week. It has happened countless times. It will keep on happening, I suppose, till I die. Peace will never return. Not for me. Not real peace. Not peace as I knew it many years ago."

She fell silent and bowed her head and continued her game of solitaire.

Jean-Nicolas stood politely and waited; he glanced at the books. They rose in magnificent tier upon tier, eighteenth-century morocco bindings tooled in gold and engraved with an elaborate golden coat of arms. They

were arranged alphabetically. Boileau, Bossuet, Buffon; Malherbe, Molière, Montaigne; Vauvenargues, Villehardouin, Voltaire. The old woman's eyes rose and followed his own. The room had darkened again. The fierce white light from the plane had subsided altogether and now the only light was the warm yellow light of the candle.

The old woman brushed the cards away with impatience and looked straight at Jean-Nicolas with sudden interest.

"How old do you think I am?" she demanded, with a touch of pride. "Ninety-two when August comes. If I am still alive in August. Months fade together when one is ninety. Even years fade together, even whole generations. Death comes wandering up the garden path day after day. I know him well. I have greeted him repeatedly. His face is a strange yet familiar composite of the faces of all my dead friends. Do you follow me? Think of it: I stopped lying about my age thirty years ago! Thirty years ago, my child, I was already an old woman, and thirty years ago I saw my contemporaries already falling away, one by one." She sighed, but with spite rather than melancholy. "Perhaps I shall live to be a hundred. Perhaps. It is a thing of the most utter indifference to me, frankly. Death comes wandering up the path, day in, day out, and whether he opens the door tomorrow or the next day, frankly, does it matter?

"Yes," she added with petulance. "There's a war going on. They've cut off the electricity and the gas. Félicien looks thinner. There are unhealthy shadows under his eyes. He's been coughing. He tells me there's still enough food left, all the same. . . . Listen, my child. When I was a little girl I used to sit on my great-grandfather's lap and hear him tell stories. He had seen Danton! He had seen St. Just! He remembered the echoes of the great Revolution penetrating even our little château in Touraine. As one grows old, as old as I am, one's re-

collections become delicately enmeshed with the memories of our forefathers. You follow me? Yes, I feel that I myself have seen Danton and the others. When I consider this new war, which they all assure me is a bloody and terrible war, I nevertheless consider it with the eyes of a woman who once laid eyes on Robespierre! Yes, and on Voltaire!" Her fingers moved toward the bronze bust and caressed the sharp, shrewd face with a sudden intensity of tenderness. Jean-Nicolas watched her with growing wonder. Her vigour and violence of heart had succeeded in bringing to life, in no time at all, a vivid relationship between herself and Jean-Nicolas; between herself and her great-grandfather; herself and Voltaire. "And so I see the war, my child, without passion, without fear. I see it without anger, without humiliation, without astonishment. I see it with weariness, weariness, weariness." She leaned over again to touch the bell. "Ah yes," she said bitterly. "They've cut off the electricity." She leaned over and grasped at one of the crutches and began to beat angrily on the floor. "Félicien," she cried. "Félicien! Félicien!"

Chapter Thirty

JEAN-NICOLAS followed the old butler down a long oak-panelled corridor and through a small door concealed in a stone alcove; and then down a circular stairway into the cellar.

"It's cooler, less noisy down here, monsieur," Félicien observed with an air of ironic ceremoniousness, and coughed faintly. "This is where Madame la Marquise prefers her guests to stay at present. You'll excuse us?" He placed the candlestick on the stairs.

Now Jean-Nicolas could see him clearly. He was the thinnest man he had ever seen. His shabby butler's uniform hung from him in perpendicular wrinkles, and

the body beneath seemed constructed of wire. His face was so thin and knifelike that it seemed to be a perpetual profile; it was visible only from the side. His hair was cut short and *en brosse* and speckled with grey. The skin on his neck was red and shrunken. His eyes were huge, dispassionate, watery: he resembled an intelligent and ageing ostrich.

"You'd like dinner of course? Yes? Germaine will bring you something." He climbed up the stairs again. At the top of the stairway he turned. "Leave the candle where it is, please, monsieur. One can't be too careful."

The candle cast a small and clearly defined circle of light. Beyond this circle lay the damp and dusky and almost invisible reaches of the wine cellar. They receded, level after level and alcove upon alcove, into darker and darker hollows of stone, where rows of dusky bottles lay faintly glimmering and there was the dusky sheen of the copper hoops on the barrels. Jean-Nicolas began to explore. Shrouds of cobweb, opaque with dust, hung draped over the rows of Burgundy and Sauterne. There was a delicious cool fragrance of ancient vaults and autumn fruits.

Jean-Nicolas felt weak with hunger and thirst. He sat down again.

Now and then a gust of air stirred the candle flame, and the circle of light rose gently and fell, and drew a misty wave of light across the sea of iridescent green corks. Jean-Nicolas now began to feel safe and sequestered; he felt a kind of torpid, reminiscent joy.

Presently the door upstairs opened again. "Careful, please, Germaine," Félicien was saying. A stout woman in black was climbing down the stairs with a tray in her hands, step by apprehensive step. The keys at her side kept jingling. Behind her came Félicien with the wine glasses and brandy glasses.

Germaine placed the tray on an empty barrel and sat down, panting.

"Please, monsieur." Félicien began to set the dishes in front of Jean-Nicolas.

First there was a big bowl filled with steaming onion soup thick with oil and Parmesan and a crisp slice of toast. When Jean-Nicolas had finished this, Félicien brought up a bottle of red wine and poured out two glasses, one for himself, one for Jean-Nicolas. Germaine raised the cover from a brown casserole: it was a small duckling in thick dark Madeira sauce, with mushrooms and truffles and slices of orange. There were *pommes soufflées* and a salad of chives, aromatic with olive oil and garlic.

Félicien and Germaine sat and watched.

"I've eaten nothing like this for five years," whispered Jean-Nicolas. "There is something left of Europe after all!"

"Nothing is left of Europe," said Félicien morosely. "Europe is finished."

"Europe will never be finished," retorted Germaine. "You are an imbecile, Félicien. Europe will never die."

"Europe, Europe," moaned Félicien wearily. "The same old talk about Europe. Night after night."

"Well, after all, we live in Europe," said Germaine. "Why shouldn't we talk about Europe?"

"Europe," grunted Félicien, "is a dirty old whore with shrunken breasts. No youth or freshness left, just greed and strife and a bagful of tattered memories. That's all."

"Shame on you, Félicien," snapped Germaine. "Europe is going through a purification, an ordeal. Shrunken breasts, indeed! Europe is at this very moment proving that she is still the beating heart of the world. . . . Some more wine please, monsieur?"

Germaine poured out two new glasses of wine.

"Ah, Germaine, you insist on deceiving yourself," stated Félicien. "Europe is nothing nowadays. Nothing but a swarm of ruins. Nothing but a rotting little appendix on the edge of Asia."

"Europe," said Germaine with fury, "is still the heart of the world and the intelligence of the world. The rest of the world, I tell you, is nothing but a horde of savages and gigolos and coolies." She rose and took away the empty casserole and removed the napkin from a tray of small delicious cheeses: Brie, Camembert, Port-Salut. "Please, monsieur."

"Europe," moaned Félicien, "is a relic of the past. Europe has begun to smell like a dead camel."

"May you be sent to everlasting hell, Félicien. You speak like a pimp, or even a collaborationist. Just wait, that's all I ask of you. Wait and see what history will have to say. . . . Please try a slice of this Camembert, monsieur."

Jean-Nicolas felt the marvellous cheese melting on his tongue; and as he listened to the two old servants he felt a warm, subterranean sense of permanence. He looked around the cellar, filled with a deep and tranquil joy; the candlelight was flowing, rivulet upon rivulet, through the receding arches of stone.

"History," sighed Félicien, sipping his glass of wine. "History. What is it? Just cause and effect. Something antiquated is destroyed. Something new is built in its place. Neither better nor worse. Just different. That's all."

Germaine shot a look of rage at him; yet even that, Jean-Nicolas realized, was only a quaint expression of her tenderness, her loyalty, her deep compatibility. She replied, with infinite scorn in her voice:

"You. You. Who are you to speak of antiquated? I find you truly repugnant, Félicien, when you speak like that. . . . There, monsieur, how about just a sliver of Brie? . . . No, Félicien. Forgive me for contradicting you, but after all I didn't go to school for nothing. History is not just a series of empires rising and falling without rhyme or reason." Germaine's voice was growing elo-quent. "I don't deny, Félicien, that history is full of

bloodshed and folly, but all the same, it is slowly rolling in a single direction, and that direction is the unity and equality of man. Do you dispute this, Félicien?"

"I do indeed, my dear. But continue to think so, by all means, if it makes you happy. Frankly, I gravely doubt whether history herself cares a rap about this unity and equality folderol."

"Really, Félicien, you sound like a dirty Fascist."

"Call me any name you wish, my dear. My reply is this. You are a kind mother, an excellent cook, but scarcely an intellect."

"Very well, Félicien. Have it your way. All I feel is an overwhelming pity for you. . . . Please, monsieur, just a drop of cognac?"

The candlelight was growing dim. Jean-Nicolas could see that the day had begun. He crept to the tiny window beside the stairs and looked out. The park was already flooded with sunlight. A web of dew hung over the elms, the beeches were lacquered with a morning freshness.

Germaine and Félicien had climbed up the stairs. "Sleep well, monsieur. Good morning. Just keep quiet down here, if you please."

Jean-Nicolas lay down on a heap of old pillows. From where he lay he could see the park; he could see the two statues in the distance. They were dark with the morning dew. He could see the balustrade and beyond it the water, from which a luminous mist was arising. And beyond rose a row of interminable pale humps, like a caravan of camels moving through the fog. These were the Alps. But these Jean-Nicolas could hardly see; and soon he fell asleep.

THE FOURTH NIGHT

Chapter Thirty-One

A FLOCK of sheep lay sleeping in the dusk on the other side of the stream. Jean-Nicolas stood beside the bridge and watched them.

The bridge hung over the stream in a veined and lichenous arc, like the arc of an old man's hand, and the narrow water of the Giffre flowed along under it with a grazing and sighing and ceaselessly perishing sound. The leaves hung in the air, borne listlessly to and fro by the evening wind, which came and went like the breath of a dying man.

Jean-Nicolas laid down his knapsack. He struck a match and looked at his map.

He could smell the fleecy unobtrusive odour of the sheep; he could hear them stirring in their sleep. Their presence made the dusk seem more tranquil, and warmer.

Then he caught sight of the shepherd. He sat under a small withered tree, his back hunched like a beast's, his head hanging over his knees. A long stick was leaning against his shoulders.

It seemed the man was asleep. But when Jean-Nicolas came closer he saw the glint of a knife and he saw that the man was whittling slowly at the stick; he could hear him muttering.

"Good evening, shepherd. I've lost my way. Which way does St. Jeoire lie?"

"St. Jeoire?" grumbled the old shepherd and stared at Jean-Nicolas with his yellow eyes: "St. Jeoire? There. It's behind you." He pointed.

"Has anyone passed here lately, shepherd?"

The shepherd peered at him viciously. "Ask me no questions, stranger. My name's Gaston. I see nothing. I hear nothing. I know nothing."

Gaston the shepherd looked like a battered object,

weather-beaten, inhuman; like a tree trunk, or a wrinkled cowhide. A pungent but not unpleasant smell rose from him. It was a smell of rain, earth, estuaries, sheep dung. His face had a leathery sepia sheen. His clothes looked as though they had grown to him, brittle and brown, with the passage of seasons; they clung to him in layers like bark to a tree.

"You're joining the others?" growled the shepherd. "They're over there." He pointed with his thumb toward the north-east, where the Roc d'Enfer rose high among the ranges. "But don't ask me anything more. I know nothing. Nothing."

Jean-Nicolas sat down beside him and pointed at the sheep. "They're fine sheep you have, shepherd."

The old man's head shot up in a spasm of alarm. "They're mine," he hissed. "They're all I have! If anyone comes and tries to take them," his voice shook and his brown paw clutched at the stick; with his other hand he made a jabbing gesture with the knife. "If anyone comes! If anyone comes!" His whole body was shaking. Suddenly he grew calm and cautious.

"I have nothing. Whatever happens"—he spread his hands in a kind of dim, atavistic terror—"I care nothing. Let them come. Let them go. Let others come. And still others. I care nothing." He spoke with a mingling of rage and cunning that bordered on idiocy.

A swift ripple of wind crossed the field. It lifted the grasses and they shone pale and raw, and it fluttered lightly through the poplars, exposing the under side of the leaves, a flat uneasy platinum hue against the plum-coloured sky. The breeze carried a thick electrical flavour, and Jean-Nicolas felt ready to rise and go.

"I can see," growled the shepherd presently, "into the days to come."

"You can see into the future?" said Jean-Nicolas, respectfully.

The old man nodded grimly.

"What do you see?"

"I am a prophet," the old man announced, with sudden dignity and calm.

"There will be a flood in two months. It will sweep over France. There will be pestilence in the cities. Strangers from distant countries will sweep through the mountain passes. Black men and yellow men and red men with tattoos. All will fight in the forests of France. Cathedrals will crumble. Cities will vanish."

"What else?"

"The Rhone will change its course, stranger. The lake of Annecy will wander."

"Yes?"

"The crops will rot, the wines will go sour, there will be a plague of curious insects, literally billions. All of Provence will be black with these curious insects."

"And then?"

"Then?" he growled. "Then? There will be no then."

Jean-Nicolas rose and picked up his knapsack. "Good-bye, shepherd."

"You're joining the others?" he growled. "They're over there." He crooked his thumb.

Jean-Nicolas could see the Roc d'Enfer jutting white through the dusk above the ranges.

Chapter Thirty-Two

SUDDENLY he heard the sound of music. But it faded into the rustling of leaves and seemed then to have been no more than the rustling of leaves, or the swaying of boughs overhead.

There was something resembling a path along the left edge of the stream. "This must be the river Drance," he reflected. "I must have passed Taninges. I must be heading toward Les Gets." The Roc d'Enfer again shone above him, but it had shifted slightly to the left: he was

heading north-eastward. Now the Swiss border, he knew, could not be more than eight or ten miles to the east.

Then the music reappeared, faint and unreal in the mountain night and yet strangely in harmony with the darkness and the rocks. It wavered. Now he heard it: now it was gone again. It was the sound of a violin.

Now once more it was nothing but pines; pines and below the pines long aisles of ferns and mountain laurel. There was a sudden hill on his left, and then a slope that rose and fell and finally rose into the wild asymmetry of the Roc d'Enfer. There, among the trees, minute and wavering, he caught sight of a restless triangle of light.

The light grew rosier and more distinct among the tree trunks, and he could see there was a clearing on the side of a steep wall of rock. He could see the black outline of an alpine hut; then he saw the flicker of firelight on the window-panes.

Again he heard the sound of a violin. Now he could recognize the melody: a *capriccioso* of Saiṅt-Saëns.

Once or twice an ill-defined shadow passed in front of the firelight, which he could not see directly but only by the glimmer it cast on the pine trunks and the panes. Now he knew that there were men there; the *maquisards*.

He heard a click among the branches above him. And then a rustle, close by. Jean-Nicolas knew the sound and the meaning of that click; he fell and lay flat on the edge of a stone and held his head buried against the pebbles. Then he heard the crashing and saw the yellow stab pointing downward, and he heard the splintering among the laurels. Someone was sitting in the tree almost directly overhead.

Jean-Nicolas cried: "Don't shoot, comrade! Wait! Don't shoot!"

"Are there any others?" said a voice from the boughs, in bad, truculent French.

"Only I, comrade."

"Get up then, you bastard."

Jean-Nicolas rose and walked toward the voice.

"What's your name? If you lie I'll shoot again. Straight at you this time. So I warn you: no *merde*, if you please."

"Jean-Nicolas Martin, comrade, and I've come from Annecy. Where is your chief?"

"Never mind about the chief. Have you a rifle with you and anything else along the line of equipment?"

"No. A pistol."

"Place your pistol on the ground. There. Beside the rock."

There was a pause. Then the man in the tree said meditatively: "I don't like the sound of your voice. It sounds peculiar to me."

"I can't help it," explained Jean-Nicolas. "My heart's in the right place. May I speak to your chief?"

"Hell," said the man grimly, "is paved with hearts in the right place. Wait a moment." Jean-Nicolas could hear him scrambling down the side of the tree, swearing the whole time in a mild, patient tone of voice.

He stood in front of Jean-Nicolas now. He was a smallish man in brown overalls with a *béret* on his head. Jean-Nicolas could see his face only dimly; he could see that he squinted and his eyes were narrow and drawn upward, Mongoloid. Their expression, as they glittered brightly at Jean-Nicolas through the dark, was a nervous grin, rather glassy and vaguely reptilian. It was evident that he would cheerfully shoot without further notice; yet there was something friendly and whimsical in the way he stood and watched Jean-Nicolas. He came forward a step, and now Jean-Nicolas saw him more clearly. He had a thin long neck sprinkled with hair, and a curly grey-black beard. His face was covered with small excrescences, warts or moles, and the skin hung loose from his features: it was the face of a turtle.

"You have papers?" he said.

"A card," replied Jean-Nicolas. "Where's your chief?"

"Please. You may omit all this *merde* about the chief. Give me your pistol." Jean-Nicolas picked it up and handed it to him. "And now come along, you little bastard," he said in kindly tones. "I don't trust you for a moment. There's something peculiar in your voice. Are you an Italian?"

"No," replied Jean-Nicolas.

"To the right," muttered the man in the brown overalls, following behind. "Up there past the rock. If you were Italian I'd shoot you precisely here and precisely now. Are you Spanish by any chance?"

"No," replied Jean-Nicolas, rather uneasily, passing the rock and heading obediently toward the light. "I am neither Spanish nor Italian." The sound of the violin had ceased the moment the gun had fired and there was absolute silence. As they approached the clearing Jean-Nicolas saw a group of six or eight men sitting on the ground, and to the right of them the fire flickering beneath an overhanging rock. Behind and slightly above them he could see the windows of a tiny châtelet glimmering faintly.

The man in the overalls took him through the centre of the clearing to the edge beside the fire, and Jean-Nicolas faced a large man squatting on a wooden crate. This was quite obviously the leader. He was fat and filthy-looking, and from where Jean-Nicolas stood he could smell the smell of slightly overripe goat cheese.

The squatting man's head had recently been shaved smooth and the broad, bulging shape of the skull was conspicuous. A smooth fur of mouse-grey hair half an inch long had grown and stood upright, resembling a tight-fitting fur cap. He must have been thirty-eight or so, by the look of his ugly pale little eyes. But the flabby body and the unnatural-looking grey hair made him seem far older.

He sat, bored and inscrutable, and waited for Jean-Nicolas to speak.

"Greetings," said Jean-Nicolas, trying to control his voice, for this man was truly intimidating. "I've lost my way. My name is Jean-Nicolas Martin. Here's my card."

The squatting man glanced at it without interest. "I see," he said. "Continue."

"I've come from Annecy."

"You had a pleasant journey?" His voice had a humourless glaze.

Jean-Nicolas hesitated. "I've been three nights on the way," he said.

"I see. Anything amusing happen to you on the way, my friend?"

"Nothing of grave importance." Jean-Nicolas reflected for a moment. "In St. Pierre de Rumilly . . ."

"Yes?"

"I was taken to the *hôtel de ville*, and there was an elderly officer who presented me with a long lecture."

"Yes?"

"He let me go; I have no idea why. He made no interrogation."

"An old man, you say? Thin? Spectacles?"

"Yes." Jean-Nicolas nodded.

"Rather suave? Offered you a cigarette?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded again.

"I see," said the man. He wasn't French, that was evident. He talked French like a Pole. Jean-Nicolas began to notice the lazy, ponderous, somehow alarming reflection of extreme intelligence in his eyes. He wore a chamois jacket covered with greasy stains, bullet holes, briar scratches. Under the chamois jacket he wore a tight brown jersey. His trousers were of faded blue corduroy and he wore a pair of dirty brown canvas gym shoes, reinforced at the ankle with a leather disc. The smell of the man was sickening. "I see," he said, in

the same soft, lifeless monotone. "Here. Sit down, my friend. Let's have a look at you. So KM let you go? I see." He began to smile.

Chapter Thirty-Three

It was about an hour later; some of the men had been drinking; several had gone to sleep. Jean-Nicolas was sitting with the others at the edge of the clearing. More kindling wood had been laid on the fire and the flames had risen again, and now he could see the faces more clearly.

It was an odd group, and it occurred to Jean-Nicolas that these were not strictly regular *maquisards*; and that even in the *maquis* there were categories and distinctions from group to group, according to origin, organization and temper. Only two or three of these men were French. The leader was a Pole and they referred to him as the Big One, in tones of hero worship tinged with repugnance.

His real name was Zaba. The small man in overalls who had fired at Jean-Nicolas they called the Lizard; he was a Greek, and his real name, he explained to Jean-Nicolas, was Issakides. There was also a young Serb named Jaroslav, and this was the one with the violin under his arm; and there was a Basque named Oyarzábal; and a Jew named Schwartz, who spoke every language faultlessly. The impression the whole group made was one of dereliction; they were on the fringe; some were intellectuals, one was an artist, several were illiterate, and one or two exhaled an unmistakable underworld flavour. This was not, it grew evident to Jean-Nicolas, a true and legitimate artery of the *maquis* but an appendix, a parasite; one of hundreds.

There was one man, far older than the others, sitting on one side without saying a word.

"Who is the old man?" Jean-Nicolas said presently to

the Basque Oyarzábal, who was sitting beside him. "He looks melancholy."

"He suffers," said Oyarzábal, "and no wonder. Poor old Vuillemin. His son is a scoundrel and a thief and is working for the Germans."

"Where is his son?"

"Down in Taninges. Such cases affect one like a bad smell. It's not only the money and the opportunism that do it, but an inner rot. Scratch the surface of one of those informers and you find the inner rot. Every time."

"This man's son was one of them?"

"This man's son was a liar and a pervert and a thief. And he took to this other business like a duck to water; or rather, like a scavenger-dog to offal." He rose and stepped among the trees for a moment.

"I can't sleep," the Jew, Schwartz, was saying. "I haven't been able to sleep for three nights."

"I had an aunt in Saloniki," said the Lizard brightly, "who didn't sleep for a whole year. Think of it. She lay in a trance."

"I keep seeing wheels," continued Schwartz in tones of petulance. '"Nothing but wheels."'

"What do you do," said the young Serb, Jaroslav, "when you can't sleep night after night?"

"I speculate," Schwartz continued in a grey, ascetic tone, "about Birth and Death, and the texture of the Universe, and other elusive matters which I never sufficiently considered before."

"Travel is broadening, as we all know," said Oyarzábal. "Perhaps insomnia is broadening too."

"It is easy," stated Schwartz, "to be rude and satirical. Allow me to mention, Oyarzábal, that when a man is dying of insomnia and sees wheels all the time, despair begins to eat into his soul. And the war seems nothing. The war seems only an interlude in the great approaching cycle of human despair."

"The Russians," declared Jaroslav, "have already won

the war for us. Soon it will be over. I'm sure of it. You'll see."

"The Russians are a horde of Asiatics," said Oyarzábal in a tense, tight-lipped way. "Drive them back to their steppes and ice-ridden lakes, I say!"

"You speak like a German," said Jaroslav with fury. "The Russians are brave and spontaneous and simple human beings, and their souls are big souls, and their country is a big country. Be careful, Oyarzábal."

"There is invariably an atmosphere of violence," sighed the Pole Zaba, "whenever Russia is being discussed." This was the first thing he had said for almost an hour. His pale little eyes were continually smiling.

The Lizard said suddenly, with feeling: "People speak of the heroism of Russia and the heroism of this and that." Again he used his favoured word. "I say there is one country and one only whose conscience is clean from the very beginning and whose heroism is stainless: and that is Greece!"

"Greece," mused the Basque Oyarzábal, who was sitting beside Jean-Nicolas. "Well. Yes. But people forget quickly these days. Seven years ago another war was raging and that war, my friends, was the true battle-ground of the human spirit, and that war was fought in Spain. That was the true war and the true ordeal. And if we had not been betrayed in that war, my friends, this war would not now be destroying Europe. Mark my words."

Young Jaroslav had been listening with growing ardour, and his eyes were glistening and his lips were trembling. "Listen," he cried, "all this is words and empty words! Heroism is one thing only: to keep fighting after you have been defeated and when the fight seems hopeless, and to keep on fighting because there is nothing left of the heart but fighting. And I ask you, of which country is this true? Of one only! Of my own! You can't deny it!"

"Calm, calm, please," said Zaba the Pole. "I too could speak if I chose. But words take more energy than blows nowadays. Who is thirsty? Look, Lizard; is there any of the port wine left?"

Jean-Nicolas heard the voice of the sentry among the trees below and another voice in reply, and then a newcomer appeared from the shadow of the trees.

"Well, Moreau," said Zaba.

The newcomer nodded wearily. He had brought a parcel and he placed it with deliberation on the ground and sat down beside the dying fire and sighed; a thin long sigh of absolute, agonized indifference. "I killed one of them today," he said. "Down on the road to Samoëns."

"You were down in Samoëns?" said Zaba.

"Four men had just arrived," said Moreau. He glanced at Jean-Nicolas swiftly and casually, and continued. "From London. They'd been in Bordeaux only a week ago, what do you think of that? They'd come up from San Sebastian."

"You talked to Legué?"

Moreau nodded. He gestured toward Jean-Nicolas. "Who's this new one here?"

"Came down near Annecy by mistake, he says. Has orders to proceed to Switzerland." The Pole's eyes were still smiling and there was a brief flicker in his eyelids. Then he added: "What about this episode on the road to Samoëns?"

"He was a fat little corporal," said Moreau, "almost fifty years old, and when he saw me his eyes grew wide and still, like a dead animal's, and he muttered something in German and just stood there and waited, and that was all. Not pleasant." He leaned down and began to unwrap the parcel. Everyone was watching him, and the men who had gone to sleep woke up and rubbed their eyes and watched him.

The only striking thing about this man's appearance

was that he should have been so utterly colourless and commonplace. He was of normal height, of middle age, slightly thinner than normal, with thinning hair that looked dry and pigmentless and was sprinkled with dandruff. His face, rather narrow and pinched, looked like an accountant's; it looked neither kind nor unkind, neither intelligent nor stupid, neither courageous nor cowardly. He was the only one who wore a regular suit; a suit of grey worsted, thin at the elbow and in the seat of the trousers. He was clean-shaven also, and wore a dark green cravat. There was nothing whatever about him anyone would notice or remember, and the effect was faintly uncanny.

"By the way, Moreau," said Zaba, "Legué seemed to think that report was correct?"

"It was correct," said Moreau indifferently.

"And they've seized the papers at Annemasse?"

"They have."

"They've taken Lamoureux?"

Moreau nodded slowly, his lips pressed together as he drew the wrapping from the bottle.

Zaba's pale eyes kept smiling. "I see. Well," he said at last, "one must be prepared for anything. If they succeed in making Lamoureux talk, well then, that will be that. And as usual one must be prepared for anything. In that case and in any case."

"Have some of this," said Moreau, and he drew out a bottle of Grand Marnier. "From the little monk over by Samoëns. Nice little man, Brother Theophilus. Always ready with a bottle."

The men gathered around and the bottle passed from lip to lip. The sound of a group of planes passed overhead once, and the men raised their eyes quite instinctively and calmly, and the sound went away and the men kept on drinking.

Chapter Thirty-Four

THE embers in the hollow were still glowing brightly. Three of the men lay down near by and watched, eyes deepening, hazy with reverie. They were the Basque Oyarzábal and Moreau and the Lizard. Jean-Nicolas sat down beside them.

"Look," said Moreau musingly. He pointed. "Do you see those embers? See the shape on the left? Doesn't it somehow remind you of Sacré Cœur? And look at the one in the middle. I could swear it's the Madeleine. And back there I see the Pont Neuf. See it? More and more," he went on softly, "in everything around me, in the shapes of the leaves and the rocks, I see Paris. I see it everywhere. I see it in the clouds. I smell it in the trees."

The Lizard was leaning over the grass and running his fingers through the blades. Suddenly he said: "Look. Wild strawberries!"

The rest gathered around him. Dimly, in the fading light of the embers, Jean-Nicolas could see the small familiar leaves and tiny rubylike gleam of the strawberries hidden among the leaves. They began to pick them. The fragrance of their juice swam through the air the moment they were plucked. Jean-Nicolas held them cupped in his hand till he could find no more; then he devoured them one by one. They were very small and slightly oblong in shape; there was a delicious crispness in their skin that broke in his mouth and flooded the tongue with their tingling juice.

"They also," said Moreau, "remind me of Paris. I used to have them in the Bois every warm spring morning."

"Paris," said the Lizard gloomily. "All day and all night I hear Paris, Paris, Paris. What is all this Paris?"

"Paris," said Moreau, a thread of intensity passing

through the bleakness of his voice, "Paris is the chestnut trees blooming. Paris is the autumn leaves blowing along the Quai Voltaire. Paris is the fishermen on the Seine in the evening, the children playing in the Tuileries. Paris is Molière and Manet. True intelligence, true tenderness: that is Paris."

"I too loved Paris," said Oyarzábal. "Five years ago I'd sit in the Dôme or the Coupole for hours on end. Talking, talking, talking. I painted dozens of pictures in those days, in every possible style. In the style of Braque and the style of Modigliani. In the style of Utrillo and the style of Bérard. In the style of the early Picassos and the late Picassos and all the intervening Picassos. Anything would do as long as it was borrowed. As long as it was new and peculiar. I kept pulling wires to get an exhibition on the Rue St. Honoré, or a canvas or two into the Salon des Indépendents. As I look back on it now it all seems incredibly trivial and irrelevant and grotesque. Life seems to have passed us by, in those days, without touching us."

"And yet," said Moreau, "I wonder. I too used to sit in the Coupole and spend hours discussing a line of Mallarmé or a phrase in Proust. Call it trivial if you wish. All the same . . ."

The Lizard was listening with his mournful eyes wide open, dropping a wild strawberry into his mouth from time to time. "It sounds lovely," he muttered grimly. "Some day I shall be a painter. Some day I shall visit Paris and sit in the cafés. It must have been lovely, all that *merde*, all that unreality."

"Call it *merde* if you wish," said Moreau wearily. "Call it unreal. Say that all art is unreal. Say that only war is real, if you wish. Say that only sickness and terror and blood and rotting bodies are real. Say that we are all savages. Perhaps you are right. I kept fighting because I loved the sweetness and gentleness of France. But perhaps I was merely prolonging the sickness and

terror and bloodshed . . . I don't know. I just don't know. . . . And yet, somehow, I keep on fighting."

"Well," said Oyarzábal, shrugging his shoulders. "That is the tragedy of all fighting. A man destroys what he loves and what he fights for. And the longer he fights the more utterly he destroys it. Because the fight becomes all. That is so in all fighting. It is with fighting a war and fighting for love and fighting for money."

The Lizard rose and raked the embers.

"It is too easy to talk," he said, his back turned as he leaned over the glow. "We talk, talk, talk. Why must we always talk?"

"We talk, Lizard, because it is our last link with the past and with Paris and with all the things we love. To talk is our only luxury."

"Well, anyway," said the Lizard, "let us stop this talk about fighting."

"Yes," said Moreau. "Let us stop all this talk."

The men sat in silence and the Lizard began to whistle *Auprès de ma blonde*. The embers grew cherry-red and tinged with an ashy frost; and presently the young Serb Jaroslav came up to them and said in his halting French: "I saw a strange thing this evening, comrades."

"What?"

"A ghost."

"A ghost?"

"A ghost on a horse."

"Explain yourself, man. You sound improbable."

"Well, this is what I saw. I was walking alongside the stony path to Les Gets to fetch some bread from the farmer and this is what I saw. A black horse was coming wearily down the path. On the horse sat a rider in a German lieutenant's uniform, but his body was leaning forward and his arms were embracing the neck of the horse. The man's face was turned sideways and downwards and the eyes were closed and the face was black as ebony. 'He

is sleeping,' I thought, and I wondered: 'Do they have black lieutenants in the German army? Is he a Hindu? Or an Arab?' Then I saw that his hands were white, and only his face was pitch black and shining, and I saw that the man was dead and the blackness of his face was the blood two days old. And the horse passed wearily down the path."

"You didn't take the horse, man?"

"I was lost in thought."

"You are an idiot, man."

"I was lost in fear of the dead, and the horse passed slowly as though he too were a ghost. I was afraid."

Chapter Thirty-Five

THERE was a rustle in the trees and again the sentry's voice, and a new man stepped into the clearing. He muttered a brief greeting to the Big One, Zaba.

"Well?" said Zaba.

"He's here," said the new man and motioned with his head down the path.

"Very gratifying indeed," said Zaba. "Good work, Pelican. Give the Pelican a drink, over there. Continue, Pelican. How was it?"

The Pelican was a pallid man of thirty or so with a goitre and protuberant pale eyes. His upper teeth were prominent and his chin fell away into his thick white neck, and the face had a staring, adenoidal expression. He spoke in a rapid monotone.

"He was down there in Taninges at Bayard's as usual, and I paid the waiter to get him drunk, and when he was successfully drunk he stepped outside for a moment, and when he was outside I came up and put my hand on his shoulder and said, rather loving-like, 'How about a walk in the park, sister?' and I showed him something in my right trouser pocket and he turned pale and we walked

arm-in-arm down the Rue Victor Hugo and he didn't say a word and I kept saying, 'It's nice to go for a little walk in the woods together, isn't it, sister?' and he knew what it all was by then and he came along without a word all the way from Taninges and up the path from Les Gets, and there he is." He motioned again with his head toward the trees.

"Very gratifying," said Zaba. "Let's have a look at the lad."

Everyone was watching silently, and one or two who had fallen asleep on the ground sat up and watched attentively. No one spoke, and there was an odd, embarrassed solemnity in the air.

The Pelican disappeared and reappeared with a boy of eighteen or nineteen, a slender black-haired boy with delicate, arrogant features. He stood in front of Zaba with his lips pressed tightly together. He wore light blue pants and a dark blue jersey and a silver-plated wrist watch.

Zaba looked at him with his slow, insidious little eyes and took out some papers. Then he observed calmly: "I am about to ask you some questions. Quite informally, of course. Nothing, I trust, that would upset you." There was a penetrating tone in his voice, hard and fine as a chisel and with a hint of mockery. "A preliminary question: Are you willing to tell us the truth now, or would you prefer to wait for the usual methods of persuasion?"

The boy stood with lips tightly pressed and a look torn between arrogance and hysteria.

"Please answer," said Zaba.

"I shall speak the truth now," said the boy in an abrupt high-pitched voice.

Jean-Nicolas noticed that the rest of the men had been glancing furtively at the old man, Vuillemin. Old Vuillemin's face had been passive and expressionless, except for his habitual expression of vague, ineffectual sadness.

But now, at the sound of the boy's voice, the old man blinked his eyes and looked up. There was a stagnant, somewhat rancid dignity in the old man which was both imposing and repellent. He raised his eyes; the heavy blue bags under his eyes hung like those of a bloodhound. And then quite gently the light of recognition passed over his face. His features scarcely stirred, but they came to life with a glow which must have sprung from some wild, incalculable onslaught of love and horror.

Zaba continued calmly, his pale little eyes still smiling: "Your name?"

"Jean-Jacques Vuillemin."

"Your age?"

"Twenty this month."

"Born where?"

"In St. Gervais. That's near Mégève."

"Yes," said Zaba soothingly. "Very good. After all, it's not going to be so difficult to tell us the truth, is it, my boy?"

The young man said nothing, and continued to stare at Zaba, fascinated and appalled.

"You've been in Annemasse recently?"

The boy hesitated. His lips came to a peak and then he said: "Three days ago."

"Where are the local Gestapo headquarters in Annemasse?" continued Zaba in a slow, casual, needling way.

"In the Hôtel de la Poste."

"And the Darnand militia headquarters?"

"Next door. In the town hall."

"Who are the local officials."

"What do you mean?" said the boy faintly. "Which? The German?"

"The French," said Zaba with indifference.

"Dubois. Malye. Faidherbe."

Zaba noted these casually on a slip of paper. "Have they been watching any particular houses or cafés or shops lately?"

The boy seemed to reflect. Then he blurted: "The Étoile and the tailor's shop on the Rue La Fontaine."

"I see," said Zaba caressingly, his little grey eyes piercing into the boy's black, agonized eyes. Then he asked: "Have they been tightening up on the controls lately? Have they been checking on the papers? On the *livrets de famille*? Or the *feuilles de démobilisation*? Or the rationing cards?"

The boy said: "I don't know."

"Any new prohibited areas near Annemasse? Between Annemasse and Bellegarde?"

Again the boy whispered: "I don't know."

"I see." Then Zaba said gently, rather wearily: "You knew Lamoureux, didn't you?"

The boy's lips trembled and he seemed about to burst into tears. "I didn't," he whispered.

"You didn't," observed Zaba absent-mindedly, and made a pencil mark on the paper. "I see. Very well."

"Not," whispered the boy quickly, "until a month ago. Less than a month. Three weeks."

"You followed him?"

The boy's cheeks had developed a curious twitching motion. Suddenly he cried: "I am innocent! I am innocent! Where is my father? He'll tell you I am innocent!"

Zaba gazed at the boy without the slightest change of expression, and without any change of tone he repeated: "You followed Lamoureux?"

An involuntary spasm of hope and pleading crossed the boy's face. His voice groped for a moment. "I followed him once," he said. Then he added, more quietly: "Or twice."

As he watched the boy, Zaba's eyes lost their sharpness for a moment; a cool blue softness appeared there; some faint hint of sadness, something almost of tenderness, and a trace of some violent inner passion now buried for ever. The look passed over his hideous face

swiftly, almost imperceptibly: then his eyes regained their sharpness.

But the boy, with his eyes fixed on Zaba's, had instantly noticed the look. And instantly his own expression changed strangely; it grew passive, submissive. He looked back at Zaba with the boundless self-surrender and trust of a child. For a moment some mute, magical contact between the two was established.

The moment passed. A look of exhaustion, almost indifference, appeared in both faces. Zaba said:

"You followed him last Friday? Calm yourself, my boy. After all, we all make blunders. Well?"

"Yes," said the boy with sudden apathy. "I think it was Friday."

Zaba sighed and shrugged his huge shoulders. "Well." He ran his fingers over his eyes with an air of fatigue. "Take the boy up into the hut, Pelican. . . . It must be late. What's the time, Moreau?"

"Not late. Quarter past twelve," said Moreau tensely. "Not very late."

The Pelican climbed up toward the small châtelet, arm-in-arm with the boy. Jean-Nicolas glanced instinctively toward old Vuillemin; he had disappeared.

"Listen, Zaba," said Moreau with sudden seriousness. "What about it?"

Zaba's eyes moved slowly and peered at Moreau. "What," he said slowly, "about what?"

"This boy Vuillemin. He's no use any more. He's a ruin."

"You suggest," said Zaba whimsically, "that we let him go?"

Moreau paused. Then he said: "Not necessarily. Only this. Remember, he's irresponsible. He's abnormal. And then there's the old man."

"Well?" said Zaba wearily, closing his little eyes.

"What do you propose doing with this boy Vuillemin?"

"I propose," said Zaba patiently, his eyes still closed, "exactly this. To have him shot without further delay."

Moreau grew silent.

"Please, Lizard," said Zaba, in a voice suddenly thin and indistinct. "Have you a cigarette?"

Chapter Thirty-Six

ZABA sat symmetrical and motionless on the crate; he sat like a soft grey Buddha in the dying firelight and the smoke drifted from his nostrils and spiralled skyward as though it were incense. Under the chamois jacket one could see the creased undulations of the tight brown jersey, bulging and tremorous like a woman's. The glow fell on his furry downlike head and a faint thread of light fell along the curves of his ears, on his nose, on his half-closed eyelids.

Then he blinked his eyes. It was like a ripple brought to the surface of a pool by the slow, entangled stirring of a sea monster. In Zaba's soul, too, there were signs of a struggle; but too misty, too circuitous for any observer to grasp. His eyes twitched again: Jean-Nicolas saw now that it was a twitch of pain. Then he said:

"Schwartz. You might take another look at my foot."

It was only now that Jean-Nicolas noticed that the Pole's right foot was wrapped in grey bandages. Schwartz rose and sat on the ground beside Zaba and leaned over. He began to unwind the filthy gauze, inch by inch.

"Did you get hold of the iodine down in Samoëns, Moreau?"

Moreau reached into his pocket and silently placed the small black bottle beside Schwartz on the ground.

Zaba was staring at his foot, his little eyes still smiling. It was round and yellow and shone with distension. In the centre of the instep was a round black hole, and around that shimmered a moist purple fringe. It didn't

look like a foot at all, but rather like some large tropical fruit. Schwartz ran his fingers softly over the swelling. The pain must have been intense but there was no sign of pain in Zaba's little eyes. Then Schwartz pressed slowly and smoothly toward the wound and a thick yellow liquid shot forth from the hole. A quiver ran through Zaba's fat body, his woman's breasts stirred under the nauseating assault of pain, but his eyes remained half-closed and smiling.

Schwartz then washed the wound and applied the disinfectant; when it had dried he gently rewound the grey gauze.

"It's worse?" said Zaba.

"A bit worse," nodded Schwartz.

"We should get old Rotrou to come up from Taninges," said Moreau.

"Never mind," said Zaba. "Never mind."

Schwartz shrugged his shoulders and returned to his place under the trees.

A sense of malaise had entered the group and the men sat in a circle, reluctant to sleep and sullen. Jean-Nicolas stepped into the trees for a moment. Through a gap in the trees he could see the full flood of the moonlight falling over the mountains. It fell brightly on the summits near by, and it fell, misty, transfigured, on the peak which emerged from the depth of night twenty miles to the south.

He heard the sound of two shots near by; it came from the little châtelet.

He stood and breathed the freshness of the night. The air was sweet with a mingling of evergreen and thyme and the crisp, faintly mineral scent of great rocks. He climbed on a large flat stone and now he could see Mont Blanc in its central glory, not sharply textured and jutting like the nearer summits but dematerialized, mathematical and almost musical.

Someone touched him lightly on the elbow. It was the Lizard. He smiled at Jean-Nicolas and then gazed at the

great mountains and made water toward the silence of the mountains. He sighed, half with bodily relief, half with a humble sense of natural immensities and mysteries. He reached into his shirt pocket and drew out a small photograph. "Look," he said. "My wife. My youngest child. Taken four years ago." It was a grubby yellowed print, scarcely visible in the light of the night, of a small bright-eyed woman with a child in her arms and a big hat on her head, and the Acropolis in the background. "I haven't seen them for four years," said the Lizard rather proudly.

"Are they living in Athens?"

The Lizard glanced with a childish, embarrassed solemnity toward the hills and did not reply.

They returned to the clearing.

Oyarzábal was speaking: "I can smell a German a block away, comrades! Yes, really. A distinct, unmistakable smell, a distinctive bodily odour veneered with a whiff of disinfectant and a touch of stale beer. It never varies. I can even tell if there's a German hidden on the other side of a wall. When I walk through the blackness of a park I can tell under which tree a German is standing long before my eyes or ears have caught him. I always knew that love could do these things: now I see that hatred can too."

Moreau replied: "Hatred. Yes. None know it better than I. But hatred can become a disease. It can cover the soul like a rash."

Then Zaba spoke. "Hatred too can bring illumination, Moreau. Brutality too can become a form of purification." He was addressing Moreau, and the subtle, continuing conflict between the two men took on texture as Jean-Nicolas listened. He spoke quietly and his accent was odd, and Jean-Nicolas had to listen closely to understand. "Listen, Moreau. Let us regard this war as a colossal surgical operation. It is a thousand other things also, but first of all it is that. Very well. The patient is Europe, the civilized world. The cancer is the German

people. We are the doctors, the nurses, the instruments. And this is the nature of the operation: to be mathematically merciless, in order to achieve mercy. To torture and betray, so that their souls may at length cry out against all torture and betrayal. To subjugate our own human decency in order to teach them the need for human decency. To slaughter our natural humility to teach them the meaning of humility. And we shall be forced to justify our means by our end, which is to teach these people that every end, however noble, becomes vile under the contagion of ignoble means. It sounds inconsistent to you, perhaps? For me the consistency is profound, Moreau, and inescapable."

"The loss to our own spirit, then, will be tragic," said Moreau.

"It will be necessary," said Zaba.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"LET me tell you a tale," said Zaba.

He closed his eyes for a moment as a spasm of pain shot up from his foot. The embers were dying and the faces were falling away into shadow.

Then he began.

"Let me tell you about the camp near Katowice, my comrades. I was kept there eleven months. This was in the late autumn of 1942.

"The camp was divided into two parts. In the first lived three or four different groups. French prisoners, Poles, Serbs, a handful of Belgians and Greeks.

"Behind this lay the Russian camp. To reach the Russian camp one had to cross the other camp. So we in the other camp had a good chance to see the things that came and the things that went.

"The Russians began to arrive rather frequently. They always arrived after travelling for eight to ten days

in crowded coaches without food. A group of two or three hundred would pass through our camp. Every fifty yards or so one of them would drop of exhaustion; often they dropped stone dead. And if they weren't dead when they dropped, a German would finish them off mercifully with a bayonet. They would proceed in a long column, very slowly, each one leaning on the one in front so that he wouldn't fall. And then if one fell dead the Germans made the rest pick up the corpse. And promptly a few more would drop with the effort. We kept wondering: how could they walk, these half-naked skeletons, covered with running sores and excrement? They were shoeless all of them and almost all of them trouserless; all that most of them had left was a tattered grey shirt. And this was when the snows were beginning to fall.

"They lived in barracks without beds, lying one on top of the other. No fire to warm them when the ice began to form. No doctor, no medicine. Next to no food. The stench was indescribable when the wind came blowing from that direction.

"Each morning when the truck had removed the sewage and refuse from our own camp it drove on to the Russian camp. There the drivers would pick up the corpses, now altogether naked, of course, since the poor freezing buggers wasted no time in grabbing their dead companions' shirts. They would hurl these rotting skeletons headlong into the truck, one after the other. There were dozens every morning. When the truck was full to the hilt with thirty or forty Russians they would drive out to the ravine just beyond the camp and here they would throw them in a heap. One man in our camp said he had counted five thousand corpses lying here in this ravine, layer on layer, sprinkled with lime and slowly disintegrating. Day after day this sinister hearse would pass through our yard, loaded with dangling legs and arms and skulls. Sometimes a body would drop out. Calmly they would tuck it back again. Let me hasten to

add one thing. There seemed to be no deliberate malice or cruelty in all this. It seemed to be just the macabre appendage to a war that even German efficiency could no longer control."

The embers were almost dead now, but the moon had risen from Switzerland, three-quarters full, and the cool pale light fell across the clearing and over the roof of the little châtelet.

"Of course, my comrades, there were other things too," said Zaba. He seemed to be speaking of experiences measurelessly remote, and their terror grew pale and textureless in the monotony of his voice. "But I remember only an infinity of skeletons, grey and shrunken and with bellies monstrously inflated and covered with nameless yellow secretions. They began to resemble one another strangely. The same insect-like gestures, the same monstrous pregnancy. The same unutterable stare. They were no longer human. They were scarcely even animals. And even the guards began to beat them out of a sort of indefinable blind frenzy, for to them I am sure it was no longer men they were beating but thousands of nameless, malodorous spectres, whose faint resemblance to human beings only intensified their inhumanity. Sometimes one of them would be shot as he reached out ineffectually through the barbed wire, a few shivering inches out into freedom. And he would hang on the wire for days perhaps before anyone would bother to pluck the body away. Do I disturb you, my comrades? Surely not. This is mild, what I now tell you. This is one of the more delicate and impersonal horrors of war, I assure you. A mere pastel compared to some of the more vivid cartoons."

"We all," said young Jaroslav thoughtfully, "have memories like that, Big One. How shall we ever recover from these memories? I feel them like an ulcer rotting inside me."

The Serb's fingers kept caressing the smooth red wood of the violin which lay on the ground beside him; it was

as though the violin were an anchor which still bound him to the gentle, more tranquil realms of mortal existence.

"Shall we ever learn to forget these memories? Have your memories left a change inside you, Big One?"

Zaba sat for a moment without answering. Whether it was in an access of pain or a moment's meditation one could not tell. There were only ashes left now in the hollow of the stone, and the cold light of the moon left their faces expressionless.

Then Zaba said quietly: "A change in me? One goes through phases."

He explained.

"First, my comrades, there is sickness, the shrill physical revulsion at the sight of mass decay. Quite a number of men, to be sure, never survive this opening phase, this panorama of the dying and the dead.

"But then comes a deeper sadness, a feeling of overwhelming nausea toward the human race which is capable, not only of such cruelty, but also of such appalling and tenacious varieties of suffering.

"But then, my comrades, comes the most deplorable phase of all. The withdrawal, the sense of astronomical detachment which gently intervenes to protect us from madness. And through this curtain we see those mutilated bodies only as a kind of planetary disturbance, like the stirring of grasses in the sea, or a commotion in the craters of the moon.

"And it is," he added quietly after a moment, "this subconscious atrophy of the feelings, my comrades, which is the real peril against which we must struggle, not only now but next year and for many years."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"I TOO have a story to tell you," said the young Serb. He paused and lowered his eyes and seemed to blush.

Then he continued: "Let me tell you about my friend Dimitri. Dimitri was a school-teacher in Smederevo. He was a simple little man with glasses and growing bald already, although he was only thirty. Dimitri was my best friend. It was Dimitri who taught me to play the violin."

A deep emotion passed through the Serb's voice each time he mentioned the name of Dimitri. His face was lost in shadow but the moonlight fell on his hand, which continued to move across the lacquered surface of the violin which lay on the ground beside him.

"Dimitri was caught and tortured. They tried to make him speak and reveal all he knew, but he would not speak. He was tortured for twenty-seven days. Rumours went through the streets of Smederevo each day; rumours about his suffering, his silence, his heroism. Rumours about the knowledge he was hiding in silence and the friends he was saving with his silence.

"One man caught sight of him in the prison one day. It was the fifteenth day. He was no longer recognizable as Dimitri Popovic. His face was nothing but globules of blood which concealed a missing eye and a broken jaw and a torn cheek.

"Each day the whole town of Smederevo prayed that this hero, who to us was already a saint, might die quickly. We prayed that he might die before he suffered too unendurably. We prayed that he might die before he would be forced at last to give way and talk and betray his cause and his people and above all his newly acquired saint-hood. For we all knew that there are certain things the flesh cannot stand, and that to remain silent in the face of these things would be superhuman. We all understood him and knew him well as a man, and we thought of him continually and we shared his suffering and measured it day by day. 'Now it is nineteen days,' we said. 'Now it is twenty.' And we all knew him well as a simple little teacher of geometry, with thinning hair and glasses and a

slight stammer; and that was why the sainthood which had fallen on him seemed so inappropriate and yet so intensely real.

"He was tortured for twenty-seven days, and on the morning of the twenty-eighth day he was seen carried down the half-lit hall of the prison. His face looked like a mummy's. Both eyes were gone, Bogdan said. Bogdan was the man who saw him, he was the man who swept the hall each morning and carried out the buckets. Both eyes were gone and two parched sockets were left and the skin was blue and raw and withered. No nose was left, and the lower jaw had been torn away, and the hair on his scalp had been shaved away in curious arrow-like patches over each ear and above the nape of his neck."

Jaroslav was speaking in a kind of trance. Jean-Nicolas could see his eyes shining faintly in the moonlight and it seemed that they were shining with tears.

"And overnight, my comrades, this horrifying vision was described in whispers from mouth to mouth all through the streets of Smederevo, described again and again in every detail and by every peasant, and always with sickness of heart and adoration. He was more than a hero, he was more than a martyr, for the courage and anguish were not the greatest thing. What was the great thing was his faith, the faith in this little teacher of geometry, which made such courage and endurance come to him as a natural, quite inevitable thing. 'He did not speak,' we all whispered. 'For twenty-seven days he refused to speak.' And he added to our own faith because he embodied what the rest of us too felt, but in a lesser and weaker way.

"Yes," said Jaroslav, looking down and caressing lightly the strings of his violin, "that was Dimitri. I loved Dimitri. And after Dimitri died I saw nothing but death on every side. Wherever I looked I saw death reflected. Whatever had been beautiful to me I began to

hate because he was not there to share it, as he had always been before, and because I knew it could never be the same again for me. In every landscape I saw death reflected, and I saw his absence in every turn of the road; I saw his bleeding jawless face in every tree, every morning and every night. I cursed myself for never having noticed the true miracle of his soul while he was still alive, and as I thought back about each little thing he had said and done it all became magical and agonizing within me. And I cursed myself for never having loved and valued him enough. And I tried to comfort myself, until I realized that it wasn't I who needed comforting. It was the whole country of Jugoslavia that needed comfort, it was the whole world that needed comfort." It was almost as though he were reciting a piece he had memorized. There was a distant, dreamy look in his eyes.

He paused, and then he said in a voice that was firm and passionate like that of a much older man: "And now I sometimes wonder, my comrades, what is courage? Why are men sometimes unspeakably brave when they know beforehand that their individual bravery will be of no use and will break them and destroy them and that soon they will be forgotten for ever? Why are they sometimes unspeakably brave even for a cause which is devilish and doomed? For that I have seen too, and we have all seen it. This is what I think it is, my comrades, and I saw the way it was with Dimitri and the people of Smederevo. A man whose heart becomes the heart of a hero ceases to be an individual. He becomes a part of his people and he loses himself in his race. And all the endurance of his race and his people, whole generations of it, flows like a strange mineral into his body and makes his individual pain and death seem truly like nothing at all, like a breath of air. It was the people in Smederevo and the stones of Smederevo and all the ancestors of Smederevo that gave such bravery to Dimitri. He became like a rock in the sea. The rest of us were only

sand along the beaches, but he was one of the rocks. The waves crashed upon him again and again, and at last he fell, but he never fell asunder."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

THE deepest part of the night had fallen away. The trees around the clearing and the little châtelet fell into a grey imprecision; their texture grew weblike.

Jean-Nicolas felt his eyes grow heavy and his head was aching with weariness. Three of the men, Schwartz and Oyarzábal and the Lizard, had gone off on some errand. Zaba and Moreau and the young Serb Jaroslav were still awake. Jaroslav was showing some old photographs of his family to Moreau and Zaba. The Pelican had just gone back up to the châtelet. Old Vuillemin was nowhere to be seen.

It was then that they heard the sound of the planes.

Zaba looked up and listened carefully. Then he said calmly: "That is it." He listened again, and seemed to count. In a very flat tone he said: "Yes, they are coming. This time is really it."

The sound began to swell like the roar of an ocean.

Moreau shouted: "Quick. Quick," and they darted into the cover of the trees, and the others woke up as the thunder of the plane flying very low came closer, and the exact direction of the planes was unmistakable. Jean-Nicolas saw only three planes; but they were black and low and the vibration sent the branches shuddering.

Then there was a moment's gathering stillness and a hissing as the planes passed on and away, and then a violent explosion which seemed to split the hill in two. Jean-Nicolas saw the other three men leap among the trees. And then a sharp white streak of lightning spread from his left temple and slowly expanded. The world grew dark and bottomless and he felt himself falling.

Chapter Forty

JEAN-NICOLAS opened his eyes. He felt nothing but a cool, light-headed feeling of surprise.

Everything lay very quiet. He saw only the blue sky. Everything else had vanished.

Then he saw a little strip of ground directly in front of him, as though he were standing upright against a wall of earth. His mind groped slowly and patiently toward awareness like a vine reaching toward a wall: he realized that he was lying on the ground.

He saw some blades of grass close beside him and an ant crawling hesitantly between them, its antennae trembling.

He wanted to move but he could not. He heard the sound of a bee buzzing near by, and then far away the sound of a cricket. Then, as he listened, he could hear that these two sounds were only fragments in a vast tapestry of sound filling the air, a thousand insects near and far stirring and whirring and singing.

Again he tried to move. Something sharp and penetrating shot through his forehead and down his spine, like a burning wire.

He closed his eyes and sank back into blackness.

Then his awareness grew concrete once more. He turned his head very slowly. His mind was growing clear and he knew that he was wounded. He opened his eyes again. It must have been eleven o'clock or noon. The shadows were short and bright. Now he could see the hills through the pine trees. There, where the high range passed evenly against the sky, that must be the Swiss border. Down on the right two peaks were dimly visible through the branches. What were they? His mind sprang gently forward. Yes. The names came back to him, clear and precise as cards drawn out of a pack. Not the Pointe-Percée. That lay behind him. These must be the Pointe de Tanneverge and Mont Buet. A curious thrill ran

through him. There was a slow grinding pain in his arm, but through the pain a sense of wonder emerged, a sense of the glowing, the miraculous. The sky looked unutterably blue and the trees above him mysteriously still and lustrous.

Suddenly he heard a low steady whine. He felt a pang of fear. Was it someone near by? A wounded man near by on the ground?

Then he realized that the sound was the sound of his own voice. He was moaning with pain.

He felt split in two. He wondered: "Am I dying?"

And then, as he tried feverishly to move and to leap away from the act of dying, he heard a wild shriek, and this was the sound of his own voice bursting from his chest:

"Oh God, oh God. . . ."

Was his body really in such intense pain? It must be, his mind decided, if it uttered such a cry. But his mind hardly felt the pain at all, and the mind lurked still and separate from the body.

Then he seemed to enter a tunnel. The trees grew thin and wiry and the sky a deep purple and then quite black. The pain crept up and enclosed his mind like a shell and held it there. Then he knew that the tunnel was his pain and he knew he must pass through the tunnel, slowly and laboriously, inch by inch, toward the blue sky at the other end.

Far away, at the other end, he began to see a feeble ray of light.

Then, with infinite slowness and tenacity, he finally emerged.

He thought, in an access of joy: "The pain has lessened. I am not going to die."

He felt quite calm. It was his left shoulder which hurt, and as he glanced at his arm and saw the bloodstain he realized, almost with relief, that a bullet or a splinter of steel must have entered his left arm just below the armpit.

He wondered: "Where are the others? Why is it so still here? Am I alone? Have the other three gone away?"

Then he thought: "I shall lie calm. I shall lie still and gather strength a while longer. I shall wait." He turned his body slightly; it scarcely hurt at all.

"Soon I shall be able to move," he thought. "I shall lie still. I shall wait."

Then he saw something shining near by. It was a violin. He could almost have touched it by reaching out his hand.

Beside the violin lay the body of a man. Jean-Nicolas looked closely. It was a young man, nineteen or twenty, with short brown hair. The face was looking at the sky. It was a bronzed, healthy, handsome face. The full lips were parted and the white teeth shone through them. The eyes were peacefully closed and the face looked quite content in its sleep, but a little surprised.

Then he recognized that it was the young Serb Jaroslav, and that he was dead.

Jean-Nicolas closed his eyes once more and fell irresistibly into sleep.

In his sleep he began to hear the rustle of leaves. The world seemed dry and brittle. He felt himself full of longing for something: for what? Then he knew. Water. That was what he wanted. In his sleep he felt himself stirring and crawling through the interminable rustle of leaves toward the place where he heard a stream running.

And all the while he felt Death near by; only an arm's length away, just beyond the violin. He turned his eyes and he could see Death delicately performing its task on the young Serb's body. The boy's face was changing. A softness, a limpness passed over it. The full lips were no longer parted in a peaceful, natural way. It began to look like a snarl.

And then, still in his sleep, Jean-Nicolas felt that the boy was returning to life. His presence near by was so strong

and insistent, he was more than an inanimate object. Still in his sleep, Jean-Nicolas saw the ferns under the trees growing fuller and greater and the birds pass overhead in a never-ending column. He saw the boy's face slowly growing dark. Then he noticed that the stomach had risen, it had swollen, and the leather belt was constricting it oddly. Terrible doubts began to creep over Jean-Nicolas in his sleep. He felt that he had become a new character, a creature of piercing instincts and infinite resignation; an animal.

He saw, still in his sleep, that the day had grown exquisite and pearly. He could feel the sweet fresh breeze ruffling his hair. He looked at the dead boy again: the face was greenish and the cheeks were swollen. The feet were bursting through the tattered leather boots. The boy's body looked immense, about to explode. "This is heroism," he heard his own voice whispering several times. "This is heroism:"

It seemed he heard the boy reply: "Yes, this is heroism, my comrade."

"Where are the others," whispered Jean-Nicolas. "Where are Zaba and Moreau?"

"They are lying down there among the trees," said the boy quietly. "They too are dead." He spoke in a strangely simple, almost casual tone.

Jean-Nicolas felt an emotion pass through him such as he had never felt or imagined before.

He said to the boy: "What is it you thought of last? Just before you died?"

The boy said: "I thought of my mother."

Then Jean-Nicolas said gently: "Tell me about your mother."

The boy replied: "I see her sitting at home in Smederevo. She is sitting on the doorstep and waiting for me. I can see her quite clearly. The white hair is blowing across her face. I see the flowering plum tree at the side of the house, and the pump with the broken handle. . . ."

The boy's voice faded away.

Then as Jean-Nicolas looked at him again he saw that the boy no longer had a face. It was a fearful ossified grin which appeared instead. The buttons of his shirt had burst off and the explosive flesh of his belly emerged. With horror Jean-Nicolas saw a crevice appearing in the skin, dark, luminous, alive.

When Jean-Nicolas woke up again it was late afternoon. The sky was still bright blue but the shadows were long. He felt weary and intensely thirsty. The pain in his shoulder was rhythmical and concentrated. There was no pain when he moved his legs, only a slight weariness.

He turned and glanced at Jaroslav and felt a strange relief. There was no suggestion of death at all in the body that lay beside the violin; none at all except that the boy lay so very heavily and rather clumsily. His face was brown, peasant-like, fast asleep. Jean-Nicolas noticed the worn boots and the grey socks, recently mended with patches of a lighter grey. There was something oddly adolescent about the pimples on the boy's forehead, and the parted lips, and a few strands of hair curling in the hollow of his throat, and the thick strong hand, half open, that lay on his chest.

Then a great calm filled Jean-Nicolas and he breathed the mountain air and closed his eyes again.

THE FIFTH NIGHT

Chapter Forty-One

THE window rose tall and narrow toward a Romanesque arch, and on each side of the window rose a slender grey column of stone. The casements hung open and the light that swam into the room was the diaphanous, infinitely peaceful light of the alpine dusk.

Framed in the Romanesque arch of the window lay the dusky hills. Jean-Nicolas could see the valley spreading below, and directly below the window he could see the neat green lozenges of vegetable gardens and the corduroy pattern of what appeared to be vineyards. Above these the hillside receded into a stretch of pastureland, and these darkened into the blue-green fur of the woods.

"How are you feeling now, my friend?"

Jean-Nicolas turned his head. A small man's face was leaning over him, a dry, friendly, cunning face with black eyes. Jean-Nicolas looked at the man's head and the hair and then at the grey garment he wore: it was a Carthusian monk.

Jean-Nicolas watched him silently. There was something absurd yet curiously sweet and restful in the little monk's face.

"I am Brother Ignatius," said the monk.

Jean-Nicolas reflected and tried to remember.

"Who brought me here?" he then asked. "Did you bring me here?"

"Three of us brought you," said Brother Ignatius patiently. "Brother Paul and Brother Perpetuus and I. We were passing in our wagon on the way back from Taninges. We saw the splinters on the road and then we saw two of the victims. We had seen the planes pass over in the early morning on the way to the chapel, and we knew what it was; we understood. And as we followed the path we found you near the châtelet and we took you

and brought you to the monastery. You have been sleeping soundly for three hours, my friend. How are you feeling now?"

The little monk spoke with a certain joyful cunning and satisfaction, and all that he said sounded like the most natural thing in the world.

"I feel well, Brother Ignatius."

"Brother Theophilus has treated your arm and has bandaged it. There was very much blood; we were a bit nervous at first, I must confess. But it is not a thing of real gravity, Brother Theophilus has assured us. Do you feel pain, my friend?" He smiled rather slyly.

"Scarcely any pain at all," said Jean-Nicolas. "I feel odd and light but very little pain, Brother Ignatius."

"You shall have a cup of tea," said Brother Ignatius. He was smiling with an air of connivance at Jean-Nicolas. "You are not our only guest today, my friend. It is possible," he said, almost in a whisper, "that you will find several acquaintances here." He rose and looked across the room toward the other window and tiptoed to the door.

"You shall have a cup of tea," he repeated. "You must be hungry, my friend." He closed the door behind him.

Jean-Nicolas sat up. He felt almost no pain. He turned his head to the right and the left, to reassure himself; then he moved both legs. Someone had taken off his shoes as well as his shirt. His thick navy blue shirt hung on a hook by the window and his black shoes stood near the door. There was no sign of the knapsack. "Never mind," he thought. "I can do without it now."

A heavy gauze bandage had been wound around the upper part of the left arm, and all he felt was a sharp hot tingling and the constricting stiffness of the bandage; but no real pain.

Was it possible? he wondered. Was it only several hours ago and in the early afternoon of this same day that he had been lying in the clearing beside the body of

Jaroslav, and had felt the blueness of the sky overhead with all its noiseless intimations of mortality? "Was I merely stunned?" he asked himself. "Am I really alive and well? Am I strong? Am I strong enough to rise and continue on my way?"

He reached out his arm and placed it on the window-sill. He felt the dove-grey stream of dusk flow over the hills and across the valley and over the palm of his hand.

At that moment, with a flush of surprise, he saw a silhouette in front of the window; the silhouette of an old man, quite silent and immobile. He must have been sitting there the whole time. His face was turned toward Jean-Nicolas and the profile, the sharp nose and the rich floating hair, hung in a mellow black outline against the evening sky.

"Don't you recognize me?" said the old man, quite calmly. "Have you forgotten us, signor?"

The voice was beautiful and melodious, and a thrill of recollection passed through Jean-Nicolas.

"There has been a slight loss of blood. But already you are well. I can see it in your eyes, signor. Already you are strong again."

It was Don Giacinto's voice.

"Tell me, Don Giacinto," said Jean-Nicolas dimly, after a moment: "what has been happening?"

"Nothing momentous," said Don Giacinto. "Nothing out of the way. When was it you left us, signor? Only two days ago? Well, we have come a long way, considering. Donna Raffaelina was very tired this morning when we arrived at the monastery. She has been sleeping all day. We have all been sleeping. Tonight we continue. Now," said Don Giacinto with pride and anticipation, "at this very moment Donna Raffaelina is cooking dinner for us."

"Dinner?" The word sounded oddly sweet and domestic.

"Yes. You seem perpetually surprised, my friend. . . .

In half an hour we shall be having dinner, and it is Donna Raffaelina who has been cooking the dinner. In the kitchen," Don Giacinto confided happily, "Donna Raffaelina has hands of sheer magic."

Then he added, slowly, as an afterthought: "Where is your companion, signor?"

"My companion, Don Giacinto?"

"Yes. The black one."

The thought of the negro Quivar sprang upon Jean-Nicolas with a bright, uncanny poignance. "I do not know, Don Giacinto." He explained how he had parted from Quivar near St. Pierre de Rumilly; then he told about the burning town of Bonneville; he told Don Giacinto about the Macedonian and the Arab and the Annamese; and about the château beside the lake; but he mentioned nothing about Quivar lying murdered in the pool; nor about the men in the clearing and the killing of the boy Vuillemin; nor did he mention the young Serb who had lain dead beside him.

Don Giacinto listened and smiled a little, quizzically, and when Jean-Nicolas had finished he said in a calm, warm voice, "We have missed you—Susanna, Sebastiano, and even I. I feel an odd closeness in my heart toward you, my friend." There was a momentary shyness in his voice, but his smile remained impassive and urbane.

The dusk was growing softer. Jean-Nicolas felt his awareness of the world grow clear once more; his intuitions once more grew keen. A ripple of new meanings played over his recollections. And yet all the while he knew there was something more important to him than any of this.

"Where is Susanna?" he asked Don Giacinto at last.

"Susanna?" Don Giacinto's voice grew sombre and anxious. "Well," he whispered, "Susanna is not well. There is something not quite right, not at all right with Susanna."

He sat down on the bed beside Jean-Nicolas. "Speak

now, my young friend," he whispered with sudden intimacy, "of yourself. You interest me. I feel—how shall I put it?—an inner ease with you."

"What shall I tell you, Don Giacinto?"

"Very well. Let us begin at the beginning. Do you believe in God?"

"Do you, Don Giacinto?"

"I use a different word. I feel His presence. I think of Him as nature; all things that are a part of nature contain, to my mind, a Godlike essence: trees, animals, old age, even depravity. . . . But it is you we are discussing. What kind of man are you? Happy? Unhappy?"

"I have always been lucky, Don Giacinto."

"You are a child of fortune, my boy. That I saw the moment I laid eyes on you. Beware, therefore! The luck and beauty and success of youth pave the way for later miseries. . . . But you are still a bit of a mystery to me. There is a perpetual searching in your eyes. Tell me: what are your desires?"

"Desires?" said Jean-Nicolas, suddenly blushing, he hardly knew why.

Don Giacinto raised his hand and placed it against his chin. The ruby on his finger shone rich through the shadows.

"Tell me, my friend." Don Giacinto's voice fell into a whisper. "What is it you are seeking? . . . Ah yes, I know you are on some secret mission or other; but that is not what I mean. What I mean is this. There is a continual searching in your eyes. But a search for what?"

A slow excitement passed through Jean-Nicolas. "You are right, Don Giacinto. I am searching. But I hardly know for what. It is only gradually, little by little, day by day, that I learn for what I search. When I discover the object of my search, then I think the search will cease . . . And each day I draw closer to that discovery, Don Giacinto."

"You are a rascal," said Don Giacinto, chuckling slyly. "You are playing a game with me!"

Don Giacinto's deep Tuscan eyes rested on the young man with a strange, smiling melancholia. He was now an old man, very old indeed; his age showed in the persistence, the conceit, the ironic complexity of his gaze. But a terrible youthfulness shone there too, a wild and imaginative hunger. Never had Jean-Nicolas felt toward anyone such an odd conjunction of reverence and repugnance.

The old man turned his head and looked across the valley toward the hills.

"Look, my boy. You see those hills? On the top of those hills lies peace. Along the top of those hills runs the line which divides France from Switzerland and storm from quiet. See? See that point? That is the Pointe de Grange. And see the dent to the right of it there? Hardly five kilometres away? That is the Col de Coux. There we shall be tonight. Susanna and Donna Raffaelina and all of us. There we shall cross."

Brother Ignatius returned with a pot of tea and a cup which he placed on the broad black window-sill beside Jean-Nicolas. He poured the tea into the cup: it was surprisingly dark. Jean-Nicolas tasted it. It was real India tea; it was fresh and fragrant and invigorating.

Then he placed his feet on the floor and rose. He crossed the room. A dizzy lightness floated through his body. Brother Ignatius and Don Giacinto stood near by, one in front of each window. A sense of security and relief shot through Jean-Nicolas, so swift and unexpected that it bordered on panic.

Chapter Forty-Two

SEBASTIANO and Giulio were sitting in the arbour adjoining the monastery. Brother Ignatius had just placed another bottle of red wine on the table.

Don Giacinto and Jean-Nicolas sat down beside them. A look of secret conjecture and excitement appeared in Sebastiano's eyes when he saw Jean-Nicolas, but Giulio's one eye remained sullen and dour.

There was a grape-coloured sweetness in the mountain evening. Dusk hung suspended over the Alps, postponing its moment of departure and still clinging to the peaks, still lingering in the distant cadenza of the partridges.

"Look," said Sebastiano, his eyes glowing. "Look. The real Alps."

"They are a thing of glory," said Giulio. "A thing of saintliness."

Brother Ignatius stood in front of the arbour, arms akimbo. He nodded.

"They are the apex of Europe," he said, in his cautious, whispering way. "Among the summits of the Alps all things in Europe rise to a peak and grow abstract and eternal. That, my friends, is the thought that ceaselessly recurs to me when I look at those mountains every morning and every evening. Especially in the evening. Up there, my friends, the suffering of mortals becomes purified and the wars of mortals are forgotten; everything is blessed and whitened by the frost of eternity."

He filled the wine-glasses and climbed up the stone stairway to the kitchen.

The others sat in silence and looked at the mountains over St. Jean d'Aulph; they were withdrawing into a slow and vaporous distance; and they flared away, so still and so untouchable that the distance seemed to be not one of space but of time.

Jean-Nicolas turned and looked with sudden curiosity at Don Giacinto. He had changed. He had grown more patriarchal, more shaggy. His white hair floated in wild silky tufts in the evening air.

Presently Don Giacinto addressed Sebastiano: "Where is Susanna, my boy?"

"Susanna is sleeping, Don Giacinto."

"Ah yes. The voyage has been hard for her. She is young and frail. . . . Do you think she is beautiful, stranger?"

"Yes," nodded Jean-Nicolas solemnly. "I think she is beautiful."

All three of the Italians were watching him; Don Giacinto with slyness, Giulio with sullenness, Sebastiano with an inexplicable blending of longing and defiance.

"Really beautiful? Or merely pretty?"

"Beautiful, Don Giacinto."

"Yes," nodded the old man contentedly. "Susanna is not what you would call pretty. She is like a cameo carved out of stone. Why is she so hard? I don't know. It can't be that she has it from Donna Raffaelina. And it can't be from me, obviously. To her," said Don Giacinto, looking meaningly toward Jean-Nicolas and glancing hastily at Giulio, "to her love does not exist. She ignores the possibility of love. Her arrogance is boundless, signor; boundless." He belched gently and seemed to be smiling inwardly. "She is a subtle, peculiar creature, you agree, signor?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded. "I know her so very little, Don Giacinto."

Giulio's single eye was glowing with misery; Sebastiano's hand trembled as it touched his wine-glass. The wine leapt and glimmered in the dusk, and the light fell away from the distant peaks with a huge, inscrutable caress.

"She is hard and soft and cold and warm at the same time. You see my point? Sometimes," sighed Don Giacinto, "I cannot help worrying about Susanna. Susanna has a destructive element in her. She has the makings of a desperado."

"Women are strange and perilous creatures; their hearts are like icebergs," said Giulio, raising the wine-glass to his lips. "Nine-tenths hidden and enough to cause a shipwreck."

"There are no rules about women," observed Don Giacinto judiciously. "From country to country they vary. And I have been in many countries."

"Have you ever been in China?" asked Giulio.

"I have been in China," replied Don Giacinto, "when China was still a land of legends and embroideries. I have been in Peking, Giulio, when it was still a city of ineffable magic."

"Have you ever," inquired Giulio discreetly, "been with a Chinese woman?"

"Of course," said Don Giacinto airily, "and not only once. They are full of sly tricks and whimsicality, the Chinese women, but frankly hysterical. They laugh and laugh. At nothing." Don Giacinto shrugged his shoulders reminiscently. "At certain delicate moments," he murmured, "I feel that too much laughter is inappropriate."

"Tell me, Don Giacinto. Have you ever been with a Japanese woman?" said Giulio rather hoarsely.

"Spies," said Don Giacinto sweepingly. "Spies. All of them. And babies. Not more than twelve years old, the one I had in Nagasaki. Not a hair on her body."

Sebastiano was listening intently with his eyes wavering between Giulio and Don Giacinto.

"What of the Arabians?" said Giulio, breathing heavily. "Do you know the Arabian women, Don Giacinto?"

"Ah," said Don Giacinto, not without enthusiasm. "I remember one occasion in Bengasi; I remember quite vividly. The Arab women, my dear Giulio, are capable of the most unexpected and intoxicating flights of fancy. And their bodies, when they are under twenty, are fresh out of paradise. Their only flaw," he added thoughtfully, "is avarice. And an occasional fit of temper. But primarily avarice."

"Well, and did you ever have the good luck," whispered Giulio, "to know an American woman, Don Giacinto?"

"American," sighed Don Giacinto. "Only twice, Giulio. That was in Capri when I was a boy of twenty-two. A wealthy American lady and her daughter. Deliciously clean, both of them, I assure you. Never a speck of dirt. Full of propriety and elegance, especially the young one. And chic far beyond my limited powers of description. But too much talk, to be quite frank about it, Giulio. Too much talk about romance. About art. About kings and princes and cardinals. About Minnesota. Too much talk altogether, as I seem to recall, and an insufficiency of practical application, if you discern what I mean."

A delicious smell of something being fried, some kind of bird perhaps, and the scent of fried onions came down from the kitchen. Jean-Nicolas could hear the melodious mingling of kitchen sounds—the sizzling of the frying-pan, the clatter of pots and pans, the scraping of spoons and the whipping of the sauce, and the knife chopping away on the wooden table—all blending into a cosy, medieval harmony.

Giulio had grown thoughtful.

"For me it is difficult," he said presently. "Truly difficult."

"What is difficult for you, Giulio?"

"This thing of lust," said Giulio heavily. "This lack of women. It is not only a thing of desire, Don Giacinto. It is, for me, a thing of pain." He placed his hand above his groin. "I suffer, Don Giacinto. I ache with too much seed. Night and day."

"There is a simple remedy," said Don Giacinto rather crudely.

"Please, Don Giacinto," said Giulio with dignity.

"I do not refer to it, Giulio, as an enterprise of pleasure or refinement. Merely as a thing of expediency. Don't misunderstand me, please, Giulio."

Giulio's face was dark with melancholy. He filled himself a third glass of wine. "What I need, Don Giacinto,"

he said in a low dull surge of anguish, "you well know. What I need is what I shall never have. I am an ugly man and what I need and keep needing night and day no woman will ever give me. I am sick at heart, Don Giacinto. My soul is in disorder. What I need is love, Don Giacinto."

The group grew silent. For several minutes no one spoke.

Then Jean-Nicolas saw a figure moving among the fruit trees below the arbour. He rose.

"Ah," said Don Giacinto, following Jean-Nicolas' gaze; "there is Susanna." He smiled cryptically. "You must go and greet Susanna, signor. But don't be long! Dinner will soon be ready!"

Chapter Forty-Three

JEAN-NICOLAS climbed down the path and stood among the fruit trees. Susanna had gone. She was nowhere to be seen.

The world was veiled. The sound of his footsteps clung to the soft ground, and now the monastery was hidden and the sound of Don Giacinto's voice from the arbour faded away.

Then he caught sight of her bright red dress and he saw her standing under an apple tree, leaning against the trunk with her right arm extended and resting on the lowest bough. Instantly he recognized the golden curve of her neck and the slow, patrician, involuntary grace of her posture. She had seen him and was awaiting him and there was a look of solemnity in her face.

"Good evening, signor."

"Good evening, Susanna."

He scarcely knew what it was he felt. Incredulity; a tremor of uneasiness, of things irrevocable, dissipating into the unknown. It was almost, for a moment, like a stab of

despair. He felt strangely shy. He scarcely dared to look at her.

"Donna Raffaelina told me you had arrived. They found you lying in the woods. Were you unconscious?" Her voice groped through the shadows, dim and disconcerted. "Tell me, signor, does the wound hurt?" She pointed to the bandage. She was speaking with a swift, birdlike agitation which was new.

"No, Susanna; it no longer hurts."

"A little, perhaps?"

"It throbs a little."

She sat down and leaned her head against the tree trunk. Yes, she had changed. Or at least, she was revealing a new thing in herself, a new and evasive shimmer. She was less translucent and more submerged; more womanly.

"You look pale, Susanna."

She glanced at him with a moment's anxiety. "Do I look homely today?"

Jean-Nicolas smiled. "You never used to care about the way you looked. Do you care now?"

She turned her head away and lowered her eyes and said softly: "Yes, I care now, signor; I do not wish to look pale and ugly to you."

"No?" said Jean-Nicolas. There was a thing in her voice which filled him with suspense. "Susanna, you have changed. Something inside you has changed. What is it?"

She did not stir but her body somehow echoed what he longed for and what he longed to hear, and he felt that it was full of a tightening and a loosening, a leaping and a subsiding, a daring and a deep fear.

Then she said quietly: "It is because today you have become dear to me."

Jean-Nicolas held his breath.

"Two days ago you were still a stranger, but yesterday I thought of you very much and this morning, just

before I fell asleep, I realized that you were truly dear to me."

Her head was still turned away and her eyes were closed, and Jean-Nicolas drew her shoulders tenderly to him and he drew her head to his own. His lips grazed over the surface of her cheek. She remained quite still.

"That is all in the world that I have prayed for, Susanna," he whispered.

She smiled with a kind of melancholy delight and turned her face to his, and with her eyes still closed her lips sought his and then an unutterable new sweetness shot through Jean-Nicolas from head to foot, and the darkness of the orchard closed around him like a shell and annihilated every sound, every thought, every misgiving.

"You are dear to me," she whispered again and again. "I want you to know that and you must understand that clearly, signor."

"You must wait," he said, gently withdrawing, "before you are sure of that. You cannot be sure of that so suddenly. You must wait, Susanna. Wait and be sure."

"Oh, you don't understand this, signor. This is not a thing that is mysterious and complicated. This is a simple thing, like suddenly coming to the sea. It is quite simple and I know it and I do not need to wait."

"You know that you are dear to me also, Susanna."

And instantly she melted into his arms and her face lay buried on his shoulder and a warm dark surrender flowered out in her and passed over into his own body. The orchard closed about them breathless, incredulous, and to Jean-Nicolas it was as though the world beyond the snowy shell of the orchard had ceased existing, and they were like a single star floating in space.

"Yes," she whispered, in an intensity of joy. "It is so. It is so. Never again shall I say to you something that is not so, signor."

Jean-Nicolas felt a warm, secret laughter within himself. And he asked:

"Why do you still call me signor?"

"It comes naturally to me. . . . And I cannot pronounce the French name with elegance."

"You cannot call me signor for ever, Susanna."

"Then I shall call you Giovanni. To me that comes easily and it is simple and familiar. Would it make you angry if I call you Giovanni?"

"Call me Giovanni," whispered Jean-Nicolas.

The monastery bell began to ring. The sound of the bell flowed through the orchard and gently penetrated the shell which enclosed them, and then the mellow evening sound expanded and slowly withdrew the shell, layer by layer, until their secrecy disintegrated and their eyes were open and the world was real again. The mountains hung blue in the distance and the monastery walls showed black through the foaming branches.

"I feel," said Susanna, "a kind of happiness that I never felt before. It cuts like a knife and it stings: but the sting is warm, like too much wine."

The bell continued to ring; then it ceased ringing but the sound continued to hang among the branches, stirring the white petals; and the sound still rolled slowly through the valley and over the hills.

"What is it we have, Giovanni? Here inside us? Tell me, what is it we have?"

"Love is an enormous thing," he said thoughtfully, "and yet it is a little, little thing. When everything else is gone it is the last thing left to people to keep them warm, Susanna. Look. It is growing dark already. Everywhere it is growing dark, north and south, my dear. Love is the last thing to keep the darkness from entering us, and it is a little thing, Susanna. It is two lonely selves reaching through the darkness and touching and embracing, to keep the darkness from entering the soul."

"To me," said Susanna, "it is not that. To me it is a strength and an infinitude of strength, Giovanni."

She looked at him and there was a curious animation of grief in the tenderness of her look.

A voice was calling from the arbour. "Come, stranger! Come, Susanna! It is time for dinner." It was Donna Raffaelina calling.

Chapter Forty-Four

THERE were eight of them sitting at the long table in the arbour. There were Don Giacinto with his white hair fluttering in the evening breeze, and Donna Raffaelina who kept leaping up and running into the kitchen. There were Giulio and Sebastiano and Susanna, and beside Susanna sat Jean-Nicolas with his hand grazing hers and his body warm with longing at the closeness of hers. There were Brother Ignatius who moved light-footedly around the table to refill the wine-glasses, and Brother Theophilus, a stout little merry-eyed monk, who followed Donna Raffaelina in and out of the kitchen.

There had been a hot broth with a flavouring of port wine and then some of Donna Raffaelina's delicately seasoned spaghetti, and now Brother Theophilus came down the stairway to the arbour carrying a long steaming platter on which eight roasted pigeons lay in a row. He set the platter in front of Don Giacinto and everyone sighed with joy at the feathery fragrance that rose from the bronze-tinted birds. They lay in a row, each exactly like the next, each with the legs tidily cut and the wings tucked back behind the body, and a strip of bacon laid across the chest like a bib, and the heads all turned sideways with each beak piercing an olive, and under each head, like a pillow, lay a slice of toast drenched in gravy and covered with fried mushrooms.

"Donna Raffaelina," sighed the old man, "you have a magical touch when it comes to the things of the kitchen. Delicacy of flavour flows out of your fingers like water

from a pump. My compliments, Donna Raffaelina, my dear."

"This will give us strength perhaps," murmured Donna Raffaelina modestly, "for our journey tonight."

"It is not far," Brother Ignatius reassured them. "Only a stone's throw to the border. You can do it in three hours. Three hours at the most on a moonlit night."

"Three hours is three long hours, Brother Ignatius," she said sceptically. "Remember, we are old and we are weary and our feet are red with blisters."

Donna Raffaelina had changed too. Her voice had grown subdued and weary. But her eyes looked blacker, more intense and more penetrating, they glittered with the light of some newly detected solace.

"Giulio and I," said Don Giacinto, "were speaking of women, my dear. Well, I have been married to you for thirty-three years and we have been blessed with six children, two of which are still at our side, and we have seen much happiness and misery together, and yet the plain fact of the matter is that you are still a mystery to me, my dear."

"It is as I said," said Giulio gloomily. "All women are a mystery and a caprice and a cruelty."

"Ah, you speak from sorrow and embitterment: remember that, Giulio. Mystery; yes. Caprice, yes, in a way. But cruelty—well, that isn't quite the word I should have chosen myself, Giulio. I have known many a woman who was nothing if not philanthropical, and, frankly, I speak from experience."

Jean-Nicolas ran his fingers through Susanna's hand and she turned her head and gazed at him with her newly explored adoration. He could scarcely recognize her. She had grown solemn and preoccupied. There was a pallor in her face and a feverish frailty in her expression.

"Men," said Brother Theophilus, peering with joviality over the top of his wine-glass and his lips gleaming with

gravy, "men are far weaker than women. Only to the thoughtless do women seem complex and inconstant and frail. There is a bottomless well of resignation and natural endurance in every woman. A man grows hard outside, but a woman's strength is within; she is the vertebrate, man is the crustacean."

Brother Ignatius strolled softly around the table once more to fill the glasses. The dusk had been long and lingering but now it was gone and the blackness of night was appearing over Switzerland, and through the foliage of the arbour they could see the stars beginning to twinkle.

"Man is frail," sighed Don Giacinto, "and to live is to rot. Please consider. We were all little babies once. Once we all lay tucked away in our cradles. Once we all, you too, Giulio, and you, Brother Ignatius, likewise, once we all sucked at the breast of a mother who adored us above all things. Is this not truly bizarre?"

"Why bizarre?" growled Giulio. "For me it seems quite natural that we were all born, at some point or other."

"You miss my point, Giulio, as usual. We were all innocent babies once. And now look at us. Some of us are bald, some fat, some withered, some of us are drunkards, some are misers, some are cowards. We have all travelled far. We have all lost our way. Ah, Brother Ignatius, we are all miserable sinners, and the years have twisted our hearts and our bodies in equal measure. Yes, Brother Ignatius, the most terrible facts in life are indeed the simplest, the most natural and ordinary."

"Terrible?" said Donna Raffaelina softly. "To be a part of nature. To grow old, like a tree or an animal. To show creases of wisdom and of weather and to die. That is not terrible nor is it ugly, Don Giacinto."

She shook her head and her silver earrings flickered in the dusk; and she sank back into obscurity. She was, Jean-Nicolas reflected, a kind of Vesta; a household goddess, warm and mellow in the background beside the

hearth, fragrant of spices and cereals and coffee. Only rarely, like a ripple of firelight, a hint of long-concealed suffering passed over her face.

"Ah," said the old man, "you speak with the voice of resignation, Donna Raffaelina. It was not always so. Once you too were ardent and arrogant. Once you were trembling with desire for me as I was for you, and we were both straight and slender. Do you remember? And now I begin to see those days reflected in my children. Yes, in you, Susanna, and in you, Sebastiano. You are my son and my daughter, my dears, and there are moments when this seems miraculous beyond all words to me. Yes, it is a strange and desolate thing to be a father."

He sighed, and his snowy head at the end of the table shone like a white bird preening its wings. "It is strange enough, no doubt, to be a mother and suddenly feel another creature, a separated and flawless entity, growing inside you and finally emerge. And I dare say, my dear Donna Raffaelina, that a mother can never forget the moment that her child emerged from her womb, and I mean not the pain only. But think of the father. For him it is all a thing of the mind, only through his mind and not through any convulsions of his body does he know that a child has been born, and that the child is his own, the product of a vigorous but brief spasm of delight, a shooting forth of seed which he had never, perhaps, quite intended to be a thing of such magical and monstrous consequences. You see my point, Donna Raffaelina?"

The night had fallen. Brother Ignatius rose and lit the oil lamp that hung in the arbour.

Chapter Forty-Five

In an hour," said Brother Ignatius, draining his wine-glass, "the moon will be climbing over the Pointe de Tanneverge. Then it will be time for you to go. Three

hours is all you will need. That and no more on a moonlit night."

They all sat in silence and Don Giacinto kept nodding his head drowsily; he had drunk too much wine. Brother Theophilus began to carry the dishes up the stairway to the kitchen. But his gait was uncertain and they could hear the plates shaking and the slow unsteady groping of his feet for the next step.

"Come, Susanna," said Jean-Nicolas. "Let us walk in the orchard. We still have an hour."

Now the night had become a thing of fragrances. They walked cautiously down the path to the orchard, dizzy with anticipation. The night, which only an hour ago had been dry and spicy with dusk, now was drenched with the overwhelming scent of the apple-blossoms.

"Listen," said Jean-Nicolas. They stood still. "Is that a nightingale?"

"No," whispered Susanna. "It can't be a nightingale. Not here. Not at this season."

They walked on.

"You are so silent, Susanna," whispered Jean-Nicolas, his breath heavy with foreboding. "Are you thinking?"

"Yes, I am thinking of many things; my heart is full, Giovanni."

They had come to the edge of the orchard. There was a rustling in the grass and a small dark animal, a rabbit perhaps, hopped past them and away toward the vegetable garden below the monastery.

They sat down. "There," she said softly, "lay your head on my lap, Giovanni, so that you can look up at the stars. Look. What do you see?"

"I see Orion and the Plough," he whispered, suddenly torn with apprehension: "I see the Pleiades. I see a shooting star."

He looked up at her. A ripple of shadow moved over her face. Her eyes gazed meditatively into his; her voice grew solemn. There was a warm, flowering expectancy

in her parted lips, and she suddenly looked so unbelievably beautiful and desirable that a trembling went through his body; his thoughts soared; he felt them encompassing the whole wide world, such was the leap of happiness in his heart.

"You are a strange man, Giovanni. There is something in you that watches and then flies away. There is a secrecy and an unrest in you which I don't understand, and which troubles me. What is it you were thinking at this very moment, Giovanni?"

"I was thinking of darkness," he replied, "and of time passing, and of things flowing away."

"Yes? Yes? What more were you thinking?"

"I was thinking of the world far away. Of rivers, Susanna. I don't know quite why."

"Have you seen many rivers, Giovanni?"

Her hand rose and caressed his forehead. The links of her golden bracelet glimmered in the evening darkness.

"I have seen many rivers in the mind's eye, and even as a boy I remember there was nothing that thrilled me like the names of rivers on the map and their black serpent-like lines that went winding to the sea. Name a river, Susanna, and I will describe it."

"The Ganges."

"That is easy," whispered Jean-Nicolas. "Temple after temple with thousands of pillars. Dark men bathing, dark men dying, all of them praying, and an infinitude of vultures overhead. A sacred cow sleeping on a marble stairway."

"And now the Nile," said Susanna.

"That is less easy. I see shores of poppy-red sand, and footprints blown away by the wind. An oasis of palms and in the shade a white figure kneeling beside a well. Something stirring in the shallows. And overhead a single bird with a long red beak. That is all I see."

"You sound like a poet, Giovanni."

"No, Susanna, it is only memory. I remember all the

stories I have heard and the pictures I have seen. Continue. Name a different river."

"The Mississippi."

"I see wooden houses with porches and rocking-chairs, and boats smoking and drifting through the muddy water. I hear voices singing and I see a trail of light passing along the shores, and the frogs in the swamplands."

"It sounds melancholy, Giovanni."

"All rivers have a certain melancholy. Everything flows away; nothing is lasting; everything is gently and silently torn away. The whisper of the river is the very opposite to the beating of the sea."

He turned his head and pressed his face against her body. Lightly her hand travelled over his head; he felt the tingling coolness of her golden bracelet upon his neck, and he felt the warm quick beating of her blood against his forehead.

"Ah, Giovanni," she said, "will I ever understand you? Tell me, tell me . . ." She paused.

"What shall I tell you?"

"What is it you feel for me, Giovanni?"

"I hardly know, Susanna. I cannot describe it. It lies calm and deep in my blood and is a warming, a whispering and a continual reassurance, and it comes as a link between me and the trees and the life around me. That is all I can say. It is a sweetness that lies bubbling in me and rises in me, but what more can I say?"

"Everything, Giovanni," she whispered, "carries a strange pain with it now."

And now the heat flowed out from his heart and downward, and the desire that sprang forth in his body could no longer be contained.

"Look at me, Susanna."

And she leaned down over him and the same unutterable flame leapt in him when her lips touched his. He felt the cool links of her bracelet grazing his cheeks. He pressed his head against her body and he could feel

her body grow tense and responsive, and she drew his head up to her own and there was nothing but a boundless yielding in her, and a ripeness and warmth in her as deep as the sea, and it was as though they had known one another for a thousand years. Quietly, without a protest, she allowed him to draw her red dress from her shoulders and slowly expose the naked glow of her whole body. Her body remained utterly passive, but he could feel the leap of desire in her reaching upward to join his own. But when he kissed her breasts he could tell they had never been kissed before. "Look at me, Susanna," he kept whispering. But her eyes remained closed.

Chapter Forty-Six

"AND now we must go, Giovanni," she said at last. "An hour has gone by. They are ready to start. See, the moon has risen." She drew his head to her own once more. He could see the pallor of her forehead, covered with a faint veneer of moisture which shone like a silvery membrane. A mosaic of blue angles had fallen over her body, the shadow of the twigs above. She lay quite naked and as she raised her arm and covered her face her body took on a tender, rather astonished expression of its own.

"Your eyes are closed," whispered Jean-Nicolas, "but I see your body looking up at me."

"Yes," she said; "now I can see you with my body. My eyes are closed but I can see everything you are feeling and thinking, Giovanni."

Her breasts lay flattened, small discs dissolving into her torso like mounds of snow, but the nipples were still darkened and swollen with the crisis of desire.

"It is so short a time," she said, "and I have learned so much."

"What have you learned, Susanna?"

"About love, Giovanni. All about love and only about love."

"Love. Say it. What is love?"

"Love," she whispered, and smiled a little. "I have learned this about love, dear Giovanni. That no words can speak truly of love. That no poem or statue or anything can speak with truth of love. Of the unutterable ache and sweetness of love." Her lips remained parted but her voice died away.

Jean-Nicolas looked down and studied the lights and shadows of her face. The tense wild beauty of desire had gone from it. Instead there was a rich and withdrawing magic—he hardly knew what—a look of joy in her closed eyes, a look of power, almost of triumph. And her extreme loveliness seemed, thereby, to regain its mystery, its inaccessibility. His own feeling of consummation was already dissolving; his desire was re-arising.

He leaned down and pressed his lips into the hollow between her breasts. She laughed lightly.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I laugh because my heart is leaping so strangely. And also," she paused, and opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Yes? What else?"

"Darling," she whispered, "it is your beard which is tickling me. When did you shave last?"

"Three days ago. Four days. I forget. You are shivering, Susanna."

"It is cool," she said, with a sweet, crafty smile. "It is growing cool suddenly."

She drew on her red dress and sat up and laid her head on his shoulder.

"My Giovanni," she said shyly, "I have something else to say to you. You remember when we sat beside the mountain lake? There was a question you asked me. You remember?"

"Yes, Susanna, I remember."

"Well, I lied to you, Giovanni. I was boasting." She buried her face in his neck.

"Why did you lie, Susanna?"

"Oh, Giovanni, there is something so clumsy about being a virgin. I couldn't bear that you should think I was anything so clumsy as a virgin, my dear."

She looked up at him.

"Why are you smiling? It is the truth I am telling you."

"I am smiling because I am happy," said Jean-Nicolas.

"I too am happy," she said; "yet I am heavy of heart."

She looked away and lowered her head.

"Why?" murmured Jean-Nicolas tenderly. "Why are you heavy of heart?"

"It is this that I have learned," she said, growing calm. "Once I thought I could be happy by being alone. By being free. I refused to think of love. I refused to think of death."

"And now?"

For a moment she did not answer. She folded her hands quietly, in a manner characteristic of Donna Raffaelina, and gazed back at Jean-Nicolas with deep gravity. And suddenly he recognized the eyes of Don Giacinto and the eyes of Donna Raffaelina looking at him through the beautiful brown eyes of the girl. He recognized the look of passion and desolation of the one; the look of tenacity and mute acceptance of the other. They melted together and a strange new character sprang like a miracle before him. The love in her eyes was overwhelming—so doomed, so utterly self-forgetful; and a flood of feeling more powerful than he had even known passed through Jean-Nicolas.

"And now?" she whispered. "Now I know that to live without love is not to live at all. And I know that in some strange manner, Giovanni, the thought of death and a great loneliness become a part of love. . . . And as the love grows the loneliness grows too. And as the love deepens, death seems to draw closer."

He nodded and placed his arms around her, and once more he felt the deep ambiguity of her surrender.

Then they heard the voice of Donna Raffaelina calling from the arbour. "Susanna! We are going, and it is late. Are you ready, Susanna?"

Brother Ignatius and Brother Theophilus were standing on the stairway to bid them farewell. Don Giacinto was sitting on a stone with his head in his hands, lost in thought. Sebastiano was still packing the black bag which he was to carry, tucking away a loaf of black bread and a roasted chicken and a bottle of claret.

Jean-Nicolas stepped into the darkness of the pine trees for a moment. He stood among the trees and heard the slow passing of footsteps in the stone corridor of the monastery, and somewhere the slow, continuous rhythm of prayers. A candle light shone in one of the windows. It was like a lighthouse on the edge of an ocean.

All was hushed. The trees, the hill, the monastery, were islands rising from a bottomless sea of human paradoxes; islands lapped by the marvellous airs of the night, islands shrouded in a perennial twilight of abstention. The war seemed very unreal to Jean-Nicolas at this moment; unreal, and a denial of the deeper urgencies of human grief. The flush of loneliness returned to him.

Something made him turn. He saw a shadow between two pine trees quietly watching him.

"Giulio. Is it you?"

But Giulio didn't answer.

"Are you waiting for me, Giulio?"

But Giulio said nothing and Jean-Nicolas realized that something was wrong. Giulio's knife shone in his hand, curved and sparkling like a freshly caught herring. Giulio's head hung forward from the shoulders and his one eye shone with dull, thick, animal intensity. It was when he saw this look in Giulio's eye that Jean-Nicolas realized that Giulio intended to kill him.

Jean-Nicolas took a deep breath.

He paused and waited for Giulio to move. But Giulio did not move.

Then he said calmly: "Why is it you wanted to kill me, Giulio?"

Giulio's black eye looked at him, wild with jealousy and then unexpectedly dissolving, miserable and broken.

"Let us talk, Giulio," said Jean-Nicolas, disturbed and half-ashamed. "You are unhappy, Giulio, I know it; and you are angry. But I cannot help it, Giulio."

Giulio's whole passionate, locked spirit seemed to burst forth through his one black eye. "The anger is gone now," he said, his voice convulsive with the effort of speaking. He slipped the knife back into his pocket and only the eye continued to shine through the web of the pines.

"I am sorry, Giulio."

"I followed you to the orchard, stranger. And I saw what it was between Susanna and you, and my heart broke to see it, and a great madness filled me. That is all, stranger. Now it is over. It is over. The anger is gone."

He turned and crept silently back through the pines, and Jean-Nicolas could hear the slow, despairing sound of his footsteps on the stone of the stairway.

In the distance, beyond the monastery, sounded the coppery note of the nighthawk.

Chapter Forty-Seven

It was a narrow, pebbled ravine, and beyond it the mountain stream widened and descended and finally joined the river Drance. High above them rose the Pointe de Grange and far below them trickled the Drance, a restless strand of mercury palpitating under the moonlight. There were no large trees left on this slope. The rocks lay loose and desolate. And under the chill of the moonlight the treeless waste resembled no longer an

alpine landscape; it suggested rather some dehumanized latitude; some chasm among the Andes, or the heights of the Gobi.

They had been walking for less than an hour, but the thin air of the hills made them pant. Giulio was carrying the black bag on his back and Sebastiano was carrying the sack with the clothes.

The night was swiftly cooling but their faces were shining with sweat. Jean-Nicolas felt his arm beginning to throb under the stiff bandage and he too felt weak and a little bit dizzy.

They passed a large wooden cross on the edge of a cliff with the figure of Christ nailed to it; they could see the anguish in his features and the drops of blood vivid in the moonlight. Don Giacinto crossed himself and looked wearily back into France, and shook his head. His face was thin and sharp, as though exhaustion had carved away at it.

Jean-Nicolas followed behind and watched them climb in a long column along the edge of the cliff. They passed in blackness against the light of the moon and their figures were slow and crouching, like those of fishermen drawing a heavy net along the shore. Then the path turned sharply and now Jean-Nicolas walked with the moonlight behind him and he saw them bathed in the pale incorporeal light, and they now seemed to be passing in a devout and adoring pilgrimage and their shapes looked weightless, finely spun, touched with the frost of timelessness.

The path wound up and still higher among the stones and then flattened upon a small plateau. Nothing grew on this plateau except some low, shaggy shrubs that shuddered noiselessly in the cool night wind. They passed on and the plateau was bare except for the stones; until they approached the slope again and there they could see a darkness and disorder. A black shape lay prostrate under the icy light, like a great rhinoceros, and

they could see the black explosive fragments scattered among the stones. The wind turned slightly and Jean-Nicolas could smell the acrid smell of charred metal and charred leather and oil; he could detect another thing too, more distasteful and more animal, and Donna Raffaelina turned her head and made the sign of the cross as they passed the fragments of blackened humanity.

"A large plane; a bomber," said Sebastiano when they had passed and were climbing down again toward the greenery. "An American bomber."

"Six men I counted," whispered Giulio.

"When did it happen?" said Don Giacinto, in hushed tones. "How long ago? How long have they lain there?"

Only a day, thought Jean-Nicolas; two at the most. They left the stony waste behind and they could smell the welcoming coolness of the trees again.

"When the peace comes," said Donna Raffaelina, looking at the white rolling clouds, "it will seem unreal. There will be an infinite silence and emptiness, I think."

"It will come too late; it will come after complete exhaustion," said Giulio. "It will be not a peace but a collapse, a falling to pieces."

"I have faith," replied Donna Raffaelina. "I cannot help it. Sometimes I see a strange fullness of sunlight. I see a shifting of shadows, and I see the leaves filled with a breathless gesticulation. I see a face among the shifting gold of the trees. I hear words. Truly, at those moments I feel that His presence has not altogether forsaken us. And then I feel sure that peace will soon return."

"It is only the whisper of your own hope which you hear, Donna Raffaelina," said Giulio morosely. "What I hear is very different. What I hear is not the stirring of leaves or a merciful voice among the shadows. What I hear is a rumbling, a continual rumbling underground. When the peace comes, Donna Raffaelina, there will come

a silence but through the silence we will still hear this deep, ominous rumbling. It will not be peace for us. Not in our lifetime. Not in Europe."

"Let us sit down for a moment," pleaded Don Giacinto. "I am weary, weary. Let us sit down and enjoy the fragrance of the mountains."

They had come to the deepest abyss of all, and as they sat beside the edge they saw no ground below, nothing but a darkness broken here and there by a twig in the moonlight, like a flake of mist.

"Well, we build and we destroy," Don Giacinto declared with a sigh. "Greece rose and fell, didn't it? So did Babylon. So did Carthage. Cities rise and cities crumble. What must come will come, Giulio, and future historians will not be wasting any tears over it, I assure you."

And Giulio's voïce grew suddenly ardent; his buried suffering rang out. "Nothing, nothing," he cried, his one eye flaming, "can save us! An avalanche is rolling down the mountainside and burying the whole race! We are the last survivors, Don Giacinto, you and the rest of us, before the human heart grows wholly frozen! After us, nothing but snow, snow snow! Pure clean snow, through which the souls of men will move on delicate, frozen grooves, without colour, without warmth, without separateness! Oh, Don Giacinto, the world will be a cold, white, sparkling place, with no room for the likes of us! Love will die, the human heart will be buried for ever. And no man will know what he has lost. . . ."

The others had been watching Giulio's single eye flashing in its medieval torment; they watched solemnly, with deep understanding, almost with awe. Donna Raffaelina sighed and looked at Don Giacinto questioningly.

"Oh well," said Don Giacinto, "I am an old man, and frankly I can't squeeze out a single tear these days about the terrors awaiting humanity in fifty thousand years, or even in one thousand. No. Life is short. Everything I

see now, each mountain pass, each bird, each beetle, all keep repeating: Life is short, Don Giacinto!"

He sighed, and then with a sudden strange mingling of joy and desperation he exclaimed: "Oh, you may think of me what you wish, my friends, but I shall make a confession. I am an old man, and as I look back on my life what I remember is only a few forbidden moments of love and their memory still makes my hands tremble. Oh, my dèar Donna Raffaelina, lust has driven me to vile and dissolute deeds, far more than you can ever know, and please try to forgive me! But on my deathbed, if I have any memory left at all, it will be the fragrance of those long aching kisses, and the acacia leaves glimmering, and the ceaseless sigh of the Arno. Those I shall remember and only those. . . . I cannot help it, Donna Raffaelina."

Donna Raffaelina looked at him patiently while he spoke, sometimes lowering her eyes and then raising them again. Her silver earrings, shaped like drops, shone faintly in the night. When he had finished she looked into the valley with her hands folded in her lap, and said with a simple dignity, "I have never spoken of it to you, Don Giacinto, but I have always known about those strange, stolen kisses of yours. No, my Giacinto, what you say is not news to me. Many hours I spent in misery, trying to understand this dark, forbidden part of your character. And many a time I wanted to take your hand and comfort you and tell you that I forgave you long ago since that also was a part of you. We are all full of strange and terrible desires, I suppose, and there is nothing that can alter them. I hope you understand what I am saying, Don Giacinto. Remember, all that I say springs from my incessant love for you. And there is nothing to forgive since everything about you, Don Giacinto, good and bad alike, has filled my heart and filled my life."

Don Giacinto shook his head gently and closed his eyes. He said nothing for a moment and then he said softly:

"Donna Raffaelina. There is a greatness of understanding in you which is like light in the darkness." He leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

It was then that Jean-Nicolas could see, in her eyes, the bottomless depth of Donna Raffaelina's suffering and loneliness, which still continued and would continue till the day of her death.

"Now let us go," she said presently. "We have rested long enough. Soon the moon will be gone again."

"I am weary," whispered Don Giacinto. "I am unutterably weary. My eyes are like red scales. The hill shines and quivers before me like an exposed nerve."

"Be brave, Don Giacinto," she said, rising and helping him to rise. "Look at the stars. Smell the mountains. In ten minutes you will be strong again. Be brave, my dear. It is only a little longer."

Chapter Forty-Eight

THE air grew colder. The stars grew brighter, their brightness grew piercing and intensified the desolation of the hills. The trees were small and dark and great masses of rock projected irregularly from the mountainside and hung glimmering over the path. They found themselves surrounded by caverns and grottoes, and the world had turned into a great silvery catacomb. The distant wall of mountain formed a single range which rose into whiteness and laterally receded into layer on layer of caves.

They went on and on, silent and mechanical. The mountain air had become stimulating and exhausting: it obliterated the familiar contours of space and time. They wandered on like sleepwalkers.

They saw nothing below; not a light, no sign of life. Now they could see the Swiss valleys, but their pang of surprise at the thought that peace still existed among these valleys was transitory, and then the valleys looked dark

and sullen again, and treacherous like the valleys of France.

Jean-Nicolas had never felt so close to the mountains. He had often driven across mountains, he had flown over mountains, but he had never before known them so intimately with his body and his senses.

He had lived in cities and in level country most of his life. What he remembered of the landscapes of his life was not the few months spent in St. Pierre de Rumilly but the numberless months spent in Africa and America and in the continual nearness of the sea. What he remembered was the cities on the shore and the long flat beaches and the waves of the sea; the lithe summery water and the wine-red sinews of the shore, the long white buildings along the sea and the azure glare of the sea-heaven.

But now this mountainside filled him and gripped him with an acute awareness of the earth. He felt that he was returning to a home he had left as a child. The clean smell and the solidity of rock and the cold, grey, arid upward sweep found an echo in his memory. He knew that he too had changed during this journey. He breathed deeply the high thin air and stared with sudden wonder at the pearly summit that touched the stars to the south.

"Oh, I am weary," he heard Don Giacinto whispering. "I am weary, weary."

"Another hour of walking," said Donna Raffaelina, "and it will be the end. Perhaps less than an hour. See?" She pointed to a small chapel silhouetted on the range in front of them. "That is Switzerland, Don Giacinto."

"I cannot go further," the old man sighed. "You must go on without me, Donna Raffaelina."

They paused for several minutes while he rested. Jean-Nicolas too was glad to rest; the loss of blood had weakened him.

"Never would we dream of leaving you," said Donna Raffaelina firmly, "and if you rest for a moment the strength will return."

"Ah, the weariness is not only in my ankles, Donna Raffaelina. It is more than my body that is weary."

The moon was creeping toward the west. "From now on it will be easier," said Donna Raffaelina. "Look, we have only a little while left of the moonlight. Come, Don Giacinto." And Giulio helped the old man rise and supported him as they slowly climbed the last ascent.

Susanna was walking close beside Jean-Nicolas.

"Look; your arm," she whispered.

Jean-Nicolas saw that a small red stain had appeared in the bandage; the wound had been bleeding again.

"Never mind," he said. "It is nothing serious. I feel nothing."

They walked on in silence. Presently she said, thoughtfully: "I wish I had travelled as much as you, dear Giovanni. You are full of experience and memories. You must have learned much about men which is still hidden from me."

"Not much, Susanna. Not very much, I am afraid. But I feel a new thing stirring in me tonight, Susanna. I feel a strange closeness toward the world which stretches below us."

"Tell me this, my darling Giovanni," she said suddenly, breathing close beside him. "What is the deepest thing in you? Deeper than all others?"

Jean-Nicolas grew thoughtful. At last he said, "How shall I say it? I do not know. Sometimes, in the middle of my freedom and happiness comes a terrible fear. Oh, Susanna, I suppose I am still a child, there is so little I have seen and endured, there is still so far to go. . . . It is fear that hides most deeply in me. It is fear that sends me wandering and searching. It is fear that creates my sudden love and it is fear that builds this strange, dangerous happiness in me."

Susanna had been listening carefully. "Oh, Giovanni," she replied, "what you say is a dreadful thing, and yet it is true of me too. It is true of all of us, perhaps. Of all who

were born in this time. Night and day I feel it. I feel it alone and in a crowd. Even with you, Giovanni, I feel it. This dim thundering in my heart."

They walked in silence. At last she whispered, "Why is it you came this way through France? Was it an order?"

"It was an order," nodded Jean-Nicolas.

"May you not tell me, then?"

"It was an order to discover a traitor."

"And you found him?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded; he thought back; he thought of Milliquet, of Robinson, of the boy Vuillemin: two of them dead already, and the third would soon be dead.

"And you have completed your mission?"

He nodded. "When I cross the frontier I have completed my mission."

"And was that all you found?"

He looked at her deep brown eyes. "It was not all," he said softly; and he thought of Zaba, and the Marquise, and the negro Quivar.

"Listen, Susanna," he said in a low voice, "and I shall try to explain. . . . Four nights ago I fell through the sky and landed on a field in France. My soul was in confusion. I longed to tear myself free; I longed to leap back into the darkness of my childhood. And many things then happened to me. I felt I was creeping through the darkness of a tunnel. For four nights I felt this. Then I was wounded. And as I lay wounded I saw a faint light at the other end of the tunnel. . . . And now, my Susanna, I feel that I have emerged from my own darkness. I feel that I have discovered my real freedom: in the love that imprisons all men. In their darkness I see my own darkness, and in their light my own light."

They were passing through some trees, and in the darkness Jean-Nicolas drew her suddenly to him and kissed her with passion on the lips.

"My darling," she whispered then. "My love for you is opening wider and wider. It is like a wound. . . . Some day you will leave me, Giovanni."

"My heart will never leave you," he said quietly. "Not until it crumbles."

She turned to him and pointed: "Look at the stars, Giovanni. They seem warm and close, and the earth and the mountains seem cold and remote in comparison. Do you understand what I am trying to say, Giovanni?"

"I think so, Susanna."

"When I was a very small child, Giovanni, I had an old aunt who loved me and who is now dead. One night Donna Isabella pointed to the stars and placed her hand on my head. 'Those are the dead who are watching us, my child,' she told me. 'See that one above the steeple? That is your Uncle Paolo who died at Caporetto. And that one over there is your tiny sister Maria who died three days after she was born.' I asked her where my grandparents were but she only sighed and then said, 'They watch us all night. They watch and watch. Pray for them, my child, in their infinite solitude, for one day you will join them.'"

They walked and walked. It seemed they had been walking for years. Their path rose and fell interminably, and they came to a barren place near the dry bed of a stream. The long lemon-coloured stones shone faintly in the moonlight, like the bones of horses and mules. The shrubs here were dry and leafless, and it seemed that a kind of pestilence had breathed across the landscape and passed on.

Then they came to the last gully of all, and they saw a bridge in front of them which arched over the gully. The moon was sliding away and clouds began to cover the sky.

Chapter Forty-Nine

THE bridge swung over the abyss, a golden red. It was shaped like a bird in flight, a bulge in the centre where the crucifix shimmered in its rosy niche and then narrowing in a smooth long sweep and barely tipping the cliffs on each side, so it seemed, with the very edge of its luminous wings.

This was the Col de Coux which Brother Ignatius had described to them; and the stream below them was the Vièze flowing down into Switzerland and north-east toward Monthey.

"Look over there," said Don Giacinto, leaning over the edge of the bridge. "Do you see something, signor?"

"I see nothing," said Jean-Nicolas, "but a peak in the distance and the outlines of the rocks near by."

"But there." He pointed. "A little higher up. What do you see?"

"Nothing but a long thin cloud and a few small stars, Don Giacinto."

"Nothing else? You see nothing moving across the sky?"

"Nothing," said Jean-Nicolas, and he glanced with a pang of understanding at Don Giacinto.

"You look feverish, Don Giacinto," said Donna Raffaelina, coming up beside them. "Here, sit down a moment and make yourself comfortable, my dear. What can I do for you?"

Don Giacinto only shook his head, and he sat down wearily and leaned his head against the stone balustrade.

Sebastiano brought out the bottle of claret and the black bread. "Are you thirsty, Don Giacinto, or hungry?"

"Neither hungry nor thirsty, Sebastiano, my dear son."

"Some water, perhaps?" whispered Giulio, holding out the water bottle. Donna Raffaelina sprinkled some

water on her yellow handkerchief and knelt down beside Don Giacinto to bathe his temples.

Don Giacinto's great black eyes gazed at her in silence with something like reproach.

His white hair hung over his forehead and his skin looked transparent. "Sit down beside me, Susanna. And you too, Sebastiano. . . ." He closed his eyes in a spasm of fatigue; then he opened them and looked at Susanna with a selfless sweetness which was altogether new to him. "Ah, my own dear daughter, you have fallen in love. May God have mercy on you, and on you too, Sebastiano, for in your eyes I think I see the same dark secret that I have been carrying in my own heart. Well, my blessings on both of you." He grew thoughtful. He reached up and placed his frail old hand on Susanna's head. "Remember this, my children. None, none will ever love you or understand you as I have loved you and understood you."

"My dear, my dear," Donna Raffaelina kept whispering. "Do not lose your hope."

"We live on perpetual hope," whispered Don Giacinto. "And what is hope? It is only the invisible hand which turns the hour-glass upside down again before the last grains of sand trickle through. And then the trickle of human pain and conflict begins all over again. . . . That's what hope is."

"I shall stay with you always," said Donna Raffaelina.

"Listen," murmured Don Giacinto. "Do you hear something, Donna Raffaelina?"

"Nothing at all," she said gently.

"Wait a moment. There. There it is again. Don't you hear it?"

"I hear nothing except the singing of the crickets, Don Giacinto, and the wind rustling in the leaves below the bridge. Nothing else."

"There was something else, I could swear it, Donna Raffaelina. Ah well, put your head beside mine, my dear. There. Do not leave me." He sighed and closed

his eyes. "I feel that I am floating on a sea, and you will stay beside me for ever."

"Yes," whispered Donna Raffaelina. "You may be sure of that, and now go to sleep. Go to sleep, Don Giacinto."

He gazed at her with a sweet, utterly trusting smile as he leaned his old head against her shoulder. "It is you and you only," he said softly, "who have given me strength . . . I shall recover. My dear, my dear. . . ."

Later on, while Donna Raffaelina was still sitting beside the old man and his head still rested against her shoulder, Susanna went and stood at the edge of the bridge; she was looking into the valley and crying softly.

"And soon you will leave us again, Giovanni," she whispered, as he came up behind her. It was already growing pale in the east and the morning was not far away.

The bridge began to glow faintly, an inner light seemed to radiate from the old stones. And a sense of exultation gripped Jean-Nicolas, so swift, so unannounced that his hands began to tremble and tears came to his eyes. He scarcely knew the reason: a sense of miracle, a brightness of faith, which had suddenly illuminated his five nights of travel and the endless night of the world. His heart cried out in him, "Look! I have arrived!"

He turned to Susanna and said softly:

"Come. Let them sleep for a moment. Come, Susanna," and he took her arm and they crossed the bridge and entered Switzerland.

Chapter Fifty

Now the sky gazed down at them and broadened into morning and the ranges lay folded below like sleeping hands, a little misty, veined by a web of pale blue streams. A bird hung motionless under a small white cloud directly overhead, and it was as though they had reached the very peak of Europe and the peak of the world. Now the bird hung poised on the brink of motion; now it went curving,

now descending, now rapidly pirouetting and manœuvring with the wind and now swiftly reascending in a wild arc of delight, piercing the sky with a stab of sunlight; and now it was suddenly all aquiver and now just as suddenly gone, impossible to say where.

It was like awakening from a dream. The blue films parted. The haunted, heightened world of the fugitives spread and was dissipated. Below them the Swiss valleys of the Vièze spread symmetrically to the right and to the left like leaves on a fern, green parallel chains dented by chasms and bathed in the glitter of early morning. Behind them they could see the little villages of the Drance—Abondance, Vacheresse, Féternes—running downhill toward the lake of Geneva. In front of them lay human tidiness; behind them human chaos. But it looked exactly the same. The flora and fauna were identical. The mountains did not care.

Jean-Nicolas took a deep breath. With an effort of mind he staved off once more the pain and exhaustion, which had been creeping through his body.

A chapel stood at the turning of the path, on the brink of the Vièze before the stream turned northward and flowed on to Monthey. It was a tiny chapel, only large enough to hold four or five people. It was built of porous, whitewashed stones which suddenly began to blaze as the first rays of sunlight flashed across them.

Jean-Nicolas entered with Susanna. A smell of alpine flowers filled the musty interior. A blue bouquet lay wilting at the foot of a small silvered crucifix. There was a sound of buzzing; a bumblebee was circling through the narrow stillness.

A wave of astonishment passed through him. "I am safe. I am at the end of my journey," he thought. "I have fulfilled my mission. I have learned what I was sent to learn. And I have found what I never thought I could find. . . There is a moment of peace. How long," he wondered, with a sudden poignance, "will it last?"

Then Jean-Nicolas saw that they were not alone. An old peasant woman was kneeling in the shadows, and now she rose and placed a fresh group of blue flowers in place of those that had wilted. She smiled at them with an instinctive apprehension as she passed toward the door. Her face was red and weathered and she wore a light blue shawl over her head.

"Good morning," she whispered.

Then she added shyly, "You've just crossed over, you two?"

Jean-Nicolas nodded.

"Will the war be over soon? What do they say over there?" She pointed toward France. "Will it soon be over, monsieur? Is that what they're saying?"

Without waiting for him to answer she continued softly: "I have just been praying for my son, you see. He died in the other war. At Verdun. . . . Oh, monsieur, that is what they all keep forgetting! Power and glory are one thing, and they pass away, but it is another thing when they kill the one you love; and that does not pass." She shrugged her shoulders and pressed her hands together in a weary despair.

"What will peace bring this time? Peace alone brings nothing. Yes, monsieur, my mother said it to me and my grandmother before her, and it is still true, we must learn to love one another or die, and that is the only lesson, and there is no other, and that is all there is."

She shook her head and glanced back at the flowers she had left, and then hobbled out through the door. Susanna and Jean-Nicolas followed her, and they saw the day beginning to flow through the valley, brightening each twig and animating the streams and sharpening the little red house-tops in the distance.

They climbed down the narrow path and wandered on toward Monthey.

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